

VocTech Challenge: Skills for an Economy in Transition

Green Paper

April 2023



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Foreword



Rebecca Garrod-Waters

CEO, Ufi VocTech Trust

When Ufi released the ‘Levelling up Learning’ Green Paper as part of our last VocTech Challenge, we were in the wake of Covid-19 and on the cusp of huge change across the globe. The UK’s economy is rapidly changing, with the emergence of new technologies, significant shifts in the labour market and new opportunities, careers and job roles opening up.

Unfortunately for many, we have not equipped people well with the skills they need to take advantage of a changing economy. Our approach to skills, the education system and the labour market needs to adapt to a more sustainable model that includes everyone and recognises the power of a skilled and empowered workforce across all sectors and job roles. We need to speak to people’s real motivations to learn and provide the information and access that people need to adjust to a changing economy.

To create a fair society, where everyone benefits, a growing economy is essential, but sustainable and equitable economic growth will only come when everyone has the capacity to contribute. To ensure everyone is included and valued we need to be able to gain the skills we need throughout our lives and for that we need a system that uses the best tools available that can add value for everyone. Digital tech delivered well, used wisely and designed for all enables this system.

This Green Paper sets out our understanding of the biggest problems in adult vocational education. We look at how we need to better provide people with the encouragement, access and information required to get the skills for a transitioning economy. We address how the skills system itself needs to adapt to respond to increasing levels of devolution, place-based delivery, online and blended learning, and the ever more fragmented landscape of skills funding and delivery. We also set out the need for greater adoption and integration of the digital tools we know can transform adult learning.

This report, and our partnership with Learning and Work Institute (L&W), is testament to our commitment to widening opportunity and access to vocational learning. It is only by getting more people learning throughout their lives that we will be able to extend opportunity to those further from traditional provision, achieve greater levels of more equitable growth and better prepare ourselves for an economy in transition.



Stephen Evans

CEO, Learning and Work Institute

Learning and Work Institute know the importance of lifelong learning and adult skills, not just to improve economic productivity but also as a social justice issue, so that everyone can benefit from access to good work and the many benefits that lifelong learning can bring.

We also know that the system can work better. The UK's skills base lags behind many comparator countries, those with the lowest qualifications and in the lowest paid roles are least likely to take part in learning, and we need to meet the skills needs of the future including our transition to net zero. The world is changing rapidly, increasing the need for learning, and yet investment in lifelong learning by both employers and the UK Government has fallen.

This Green Paper is the first step we have taken in our partnership with Ufi to make a step change. We identify three problems that capture some of the key challenges around how we can encourage and inspire people to learn, improve access to learning, and enable new forms of delivery that fit round people's work and home life, in the context of a complex system.

We know that we can't tackle these challenges alone, and so see this Green Paper as the start of a conversation. In particular we want to know: whether the problem areas have been identified correctly, what additional evidence you have to support or counter this, what work is already being done to tackle these challenges, and where Ufi, L&W and others, may have a role to help close the gaps. There's a huge prize in economic growth, individual opportunity and social justice in making a step change.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Executive Summary

Why we have come together

Ufi VocTech Trust and Learning and Work Institute (L&W) have come together for the VocTech Challenge: Skills for an Economy in Transition, to better understand some of the biggest challenges in adult vocational education and support some of the most impactful solutions.

The UK is not currently developing the skilled workforce it needs for our changing economy.¹ There are increasing numbers of older and disabled people outside the workforce, changes in immigration have affected our ability to fill skills gaps, and the workforce continues to age.² At the same time the economy is changing, fuelled by digitisation, automation, changing trading relationships, and decarbonisation in industries both new and old.³ It is through this lens of a transitioning economy that we've sought to research and understand the adult skills landscape, before working in partnerships to support impactful solutions.

The major challenge we foresee is that at this time of rapid transition there is a risk that the UK is not able to deliver the skills it needs. If our economy is to be sustainable it must be equitable, and this means we must ensure everyone in the UK can develop their skills. If we do not then our economy will suffer, and we will leave those who are already not well served by mainstream provision further behind.

We understand that a better skilled workforce can promote economic growth and that this must include every part of the workforce. This will require us to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to develop skills for work through their lives, building a future economy and labour market where people aren't just playing catch up but have the chance to thrive in new industries, sectors and roles. This can also promote fairness, social justice and social mobility.

¹ Learning and Work Institute (2019), [Time for Action: Skills for economic growth and social justice](#)

² Learning and Work Institute (2023), [Missing Workers](#)

³ NFER (2022), [The Skills Imperative 2035: Occupational Outlook – Long-run employment prospects for the UK](#)

What we have done so far

We started our journey by setting ourselves a question:

"How can VocTech (technology that supports vocational learning) help narrow inequalities and ensure every adult can participate in learning throughout their working lives, so that the UK has the skills it needs for an economy in transition?"

We have reviewed existing research and good practice in order to test and build our understanding of the landscape and its challenges. We have critically assessed our current assumptions, testing them against evidence from the real, lived experiences of learners and people working in the learning and skills sector.

We are publishing the results of this research in this Green Paper which sets out six key findings regarding the adult skills landscape, and concludes with three problem statements that bring together the themes of those findings through the lenses of a transitioning economy, learners, the skills system, and the role of digital technology and pedagogies.

As we move into the process of bringing together a White Paper, we are now consulting on these findings, and asking what Ufi, L&W and our partners can do to address some of the biggest challenges in adult learning and skills.



Summary of Research Findings and Problem Statements

Through the VocTech Challenge: Skills for an Economy in Transition, we have challenged ourselves to understand the biggest problems in adult vocational education – in particular, the problems that are stopping the UK from being prepared with the skills needed for a fair and inclusive transitioning economy. Through consultation with partners, key stakeholders, learners, practitioners, and employers we have made six key research findings.

Research Findings

Investment and funding

A continued lack of investment in skills from governments and employers prevents the learning and skills system adapting to the needs of an economy in transition. In particular without more equal investment, those with lower levels of qualifications and in less well-paid sectors will not have the chance to benefit from learning.

Fragmented skills system

The fragmented and complex skills system inhibits access to learning. Individuals are unsure of where to look for learning opportunities and which opportunities are best suited to their needs. This also prevents the collaborative working needed to address systemic barriers and meet employer and learner needs.

Changing skills needs

A wide range of evolving skills will be needed for an economy in transition. In order to meet the demand for this changing skill set, we need to make sure our qualification and assessment system is flexible and that we use the right language to talk about skills, focusing on core skill sets.

Learner barriers

Pervasive learner barriers persist and remain unaddressed, limiting our ability to prepare for an economy in transition. There is a failure to speak to real motivations and confidence to learn, as well as address more practical barriers such as cost, time, transport, and childcare that have been worsened by the cost of living crisis.

Digital divide

Digital skills and digital access are essential for work and learning. The digital divide impacts individuals, trainers and organisations. While the Covid-19 pandemic widened access to online and blended learning, we need to ensure this opportunity is open to all by using accessible technologies, building confidence and digital skills.

Value of learning

The true value of adult learning is still not fully understood by individuals or employers, while providers and policy makers do not have access to methodologically rigorous evidence of what improves learning outcomes. Unless individuals and employers can be motivated to invest in learning, other adjustments to the skills systems will fail.

Problem Statements

Our research found that the biggest problems in learning and skills were not only the specific challenges faced by individuals, but also the difficulties individuals, providers and employers face when accessing, navigating and adapting the 'system' to meet their needs. Our research shows that the UK needs to think differently about learning and skills, address the fragmentation of the skills system and insufficient join up with other public policy areas, and develop and deploy the digital solutions that will make a difference to adult participation in learning.

The skills for an economy in transition

The skills and learning opportunities that are needed to support an economy in transition are neither clear nor equitably accessible. We need to inspire adults and employers into learning and clearly communicate the benefits to policy makers. We need to ensure providers have the evidence of what works.

Skills system for an economy in transition

The current skills system is fragmented and is failing to keep pace with a shifting landscape. We need a more collaborative and integrated skills system to benefit from devolution, place based learning, growing online and blended learning offers, and the changing mix of national policy and local leadership. We need to better align the system to developments in regeneration, infrastructure, health and social care.

Digital technology for an economy in transition

Faced with a changing world, we are not acting fast enough to adopt and embed the technology necessary to creating accessible lifelong learning. We need to develop and deploy better technology to provide learning offers that fit around work and home life, building resilient learners while embedding a culture of lifelong learning.

Our problem statements can be seen through two lenses; an individual centred view that considers how adults, particularly career changers and those who are not well served by mainstream provision, experience the learning and skills system, and a systems view that centres on how providers, employers and practitioners experience the same problems through fragmented public policy. This is twinned with the knowledge that due to a range of factors, including the impacts of policy and underfunding, education has been an uneven adopter of digital technology when compared to other sectors of the economy. This analysis formed the basis of our three problem statements.

The skills for an economy in transition

Individual lens – How can we ensure that adults who need to reskill for their own careers and also their broader health and wellbeing, particularly those who are not well served by mainstream provision, are encouraged and supported to learn? How do we then ensure that we are using the right language and the right evidence when communicating the benefits of learning and skills to different groups?

Systems lens – How do we ensure that providers, employers, and policy makers have the evidence they need to make informed decisions about adult education and skills needs? How do we support policy makers, local authorities and providers to ensure qualifications and assessments reflect changing skills needs? How do we ensure the learning and skills system supports and links up with other policy objectives, such as the transition to net zero?

Skills system for an economy in transition

Individual lens – How do we better help individuals who face barriers accessing mainstream learning provision, or require new skills, to navigate a fragmented learning and skills system? How does public policy, including adult skills, employment support, health and social care better join up to support individuals? In the context of a system where a significant number of people access learning through their employers, how do we connect more people to funding and provision that meets both their needs and those of their employers, without trying to over describe and map an endlessly evolving ecosystem?

Systems lens – How do we make the most of a world made up of a mix of devolution and place-based adult learning, national policy and delivery, along with an increasing array of online and blended learning options, while supporting individuals' health and wellbeing? Given that system fragmentation will always exist, how do we ensure that practitioners, providers, employers, other public services and local authorities have opportunities to work collaboratively to build a learning and skills system that supports not just individual learning and skills but also community health and wellbeing?

Digital technology for an economy in transition

Individual lens – How can we better develop and deploy digital technology that engages adults and supports their learning, so that we improve access at all levels and support individuals at every point in their life? In a world where we are working for longer, dipping in and out of education throughout our lives, how can technology support individuals to build both the skills they need to be resilient to change, and provide the tools they need to manage these changes?

Systems lens – How do we ensure that the digital solutions and pedagogies that we already know work are developed and deployed where needed? How do we encourage innovation through the simplest solutions from known platforms? How can we ensure that even the smallest learning organisations or employers have the capacity to deliver high quality learning and skills without over-building technological solutions to their skills challenges? How can we build a better understanding of what works where evidence is lacking?



Next steps

We're consulting over the next few weeks on the findings of our Green Paper. You can submit your feedback below.

We welcome thoughts on:

- Whether our problem statements have identified critical challenges in adult vocational learning.
- What additional evidence you have to support or counter this.
- What work is already being done to tackle these challenges.
- Where Ufi VocTech Trust and our partners can act together to help close the gaps.

Have your say 

Our aim is that we then use these comments, suggestions, and ideas to frame a White Paper where we set out how Ufi, L&W and our partners can best use our resources – be they funding, advocating for best practice, or collaborating with others – and develop specific solutions.

As mounting evidence points to change in the skills system becoming the 'new normal', NFER's Skills Imperative 2035 project being one example, any solutions that we pursue must reflect this 'new normal' of constant change in the skills landscape. Solutions must be responsive to local and employer need whilst not propagating greater fragmentation. They must speak a common language that includes everyone and bakes in digital solutions that support individuals where they already are.

Over the next few months, we will be working with our partners to consider and define what actions we can take together to address the problem statements that we have identified. With our partners we will also be building a programme of advocacy and influencing aimed at bringing key stakeholders together around solutions to the problems that we've identified.

At Ufi we will be building our programme of activity with L&W and our partners to be presented in our VocTech Challenge White Paper, launched in June 2023. Our White Paper will:

- Launch a grant call on 6 June 2023
- Launch a programme of advocacy with L&W on 13 June at the APPG for Adult Education.
- Build on our partnership with L&W, and a range of other organisations over the coming months and years.

Introduction

Background to the Green Paper

In January 2023, Ufi and L&W came together in a new strategic partnership aimed at accelerating the adoption and deployment of technology to help every adult in the UK get the skills they need to participate and benefit from our transitioning economy.

Together, we believe that equitable growth will require new skills strategies for an economy and labour market in transition and that technology has a critical role to play in opening access and opportunity, so that no one is left behind.

This Green Paper is the first output of this partnership and marks the first milestone of the VocTech Challenge: Skills for an Economy in Transition. We will consult with stakeholders, our partners and the organisations we support over the next few weeks before releasing a White Paper, setting out a programme of grant funding, partnership and advocacy.

In the last four months, consulting widely across the adult vocational education sector, we have brought together organisations, learners, non-learners and thought leaders to share new insights and ideas that are practical and actionable, with the potential to unlock a more prosperous future for the UK. So far, the new VocTech Challenge has explored the knottiest problems facing a changing economy and builds closely on the work of Ufi's 2021 VocTech Challenge: Levelling up Learning.



Ufi VocTech Trust is an independent charity whose mission is to support the development of digital technologies that help us all to obtain the vocational skills we need to get more out of our working lives.



For more than a century Learning and Work Institute (L&W) has been working for a prosperous and fair society in which learning and work provide opportunities for everyone to realise their potential and ambitions throughout life.

What did we set out to explore?

What was clear from the start is that tackling these problems is not just about the role of VocTech but also what Ufi, L&W and our partners can do together to advocate for change and build collaborative solutions that will move the dial on adult learning and skills.

Early on in the process, we started by broadening our question, to ask:

"How can Ufi, their partners and VocTech (technology that supports vocational learning) help narrow inequalities and ensure every adult can participate in learning throughout their working lives, so that the UK has the skills it needs for an economy in transition?"

Within this we were particularly interested in how the challenges of upskilling and reskilling are faced and overcome by:

- Career changers (adults who need to re-skill in order to thrive at work)
- Those furthest away from learning (adults who are not currently in work, who do not have easy access to vocational education, or who are digitally excluded)
- Others for whom different exclusionary factors are impacting their ability to gain the skills they need, for example refugees and asylum seekers whose qualifications are not recognised in the UK.

We broadened the question in response to our partnership with L&W, as it became clear that by working together we were able to not only better understand the landscape and challenges but that our partnership had the chance to more immediately impact our ability to move the dial on adult vocational learning.

Our research has strengthened our focus on the need to support upskilling and reskilling in ways that open up access and opportunity, and support a fair and equitable plan for growth. Our three problem statements do not describe new problems, rather they are describing problems which can be seen in a new way when looked at through the lens of a transitioning economy.

One of the most critical considerations is the perspective of adults who are excluded either from trying to participate in learning or from the functioning of the broader skills system itself. This showed us that to support reskilling for career changers and those who are not well served by mainstream provision we need to change our approach to learning.

What does this Green Paper represent?

The Green Paper summarises the discovery stage of our journey and brings together the research findings into a series of problem statements. It represents more than three months of research, literature review and dialogue to test our assumptions and seek new insights from representatives across learner groups, training providers, further education colleges, SMEs, corporates, public sector bodies, investors and technology entrepreneurs.

Through workshops, focus groups and interviews, we have built on Ufi's previous challenges as well as existing research and good practice. This has meant challenging current assumptions and testing them against evidence from the real, lived experiences of individuals and people working in the learning and skills sector.

What do we want to achieve?

The VocTech Challenge: Skills for an Economy in Transition Green Paper has been our opportunity to explore the biggest issues in vocational learning with an open mind. We've sought to better understand the landscape and build a picture of where Ufi, L&W and our partners might act to affect change.

As we move into the White Paper process, we are looking to consult on our understanding of the landscape, giving the wider sector a chance to challenge our triangulation and suggest areas for improvement. We will be working closely with our partners to build a programme of grant making, partnership and advocacy which will seek to move the dial on the development and deployment of VocTech and better prepare adults across the UK for a transitioning economy.

We now invite our wider community to consider this Green Paper and contribute comments during the consultation period which closes on 16 May 2023.

We welcome thoughts on:

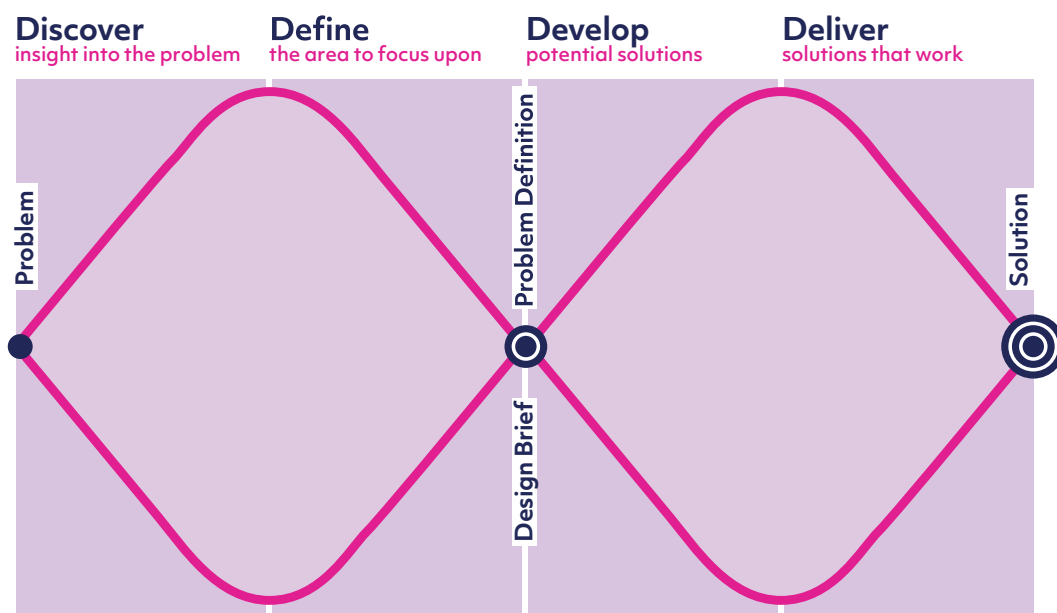
- Whether our problem areas have been identified correctly.
- What additional evidence you have to support or counter this.
- What work is already being done to tackle these challenges.
- Where Ufi, L&W and others, may have a role to help close the gaps.

Have your say



Methodology

In VocTech Challenge: Skills for an Economy in Transition we have conducted an exercise of co-creation, across our communities, working closely with L&W and taking Design Council's 'Double Diamond' innovation framework as the basis of our approach. This Green Paper represents the culmination of the "discovery" process.



img source: Design Council's Double Diamond

Our programme of research and engagement was conducted between January and March 2023 and included:

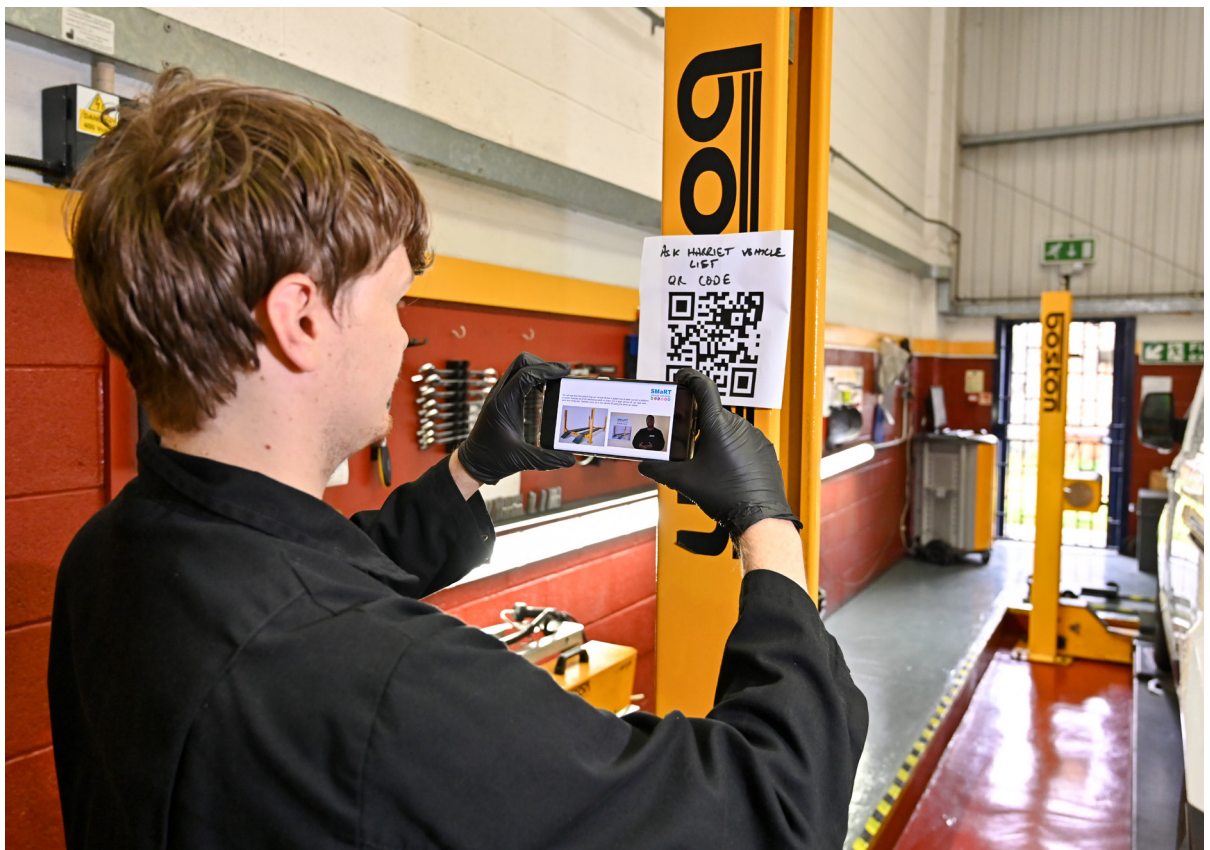
- A **literature review** to explore existing evidence on key labour market challenges contributing to the need to upskill/reskill the existing workforce; barriers to learning, upskilling and reskilling for adults, particularly those from 'underserved and overlooked' groups (e.g. ESOL learners, those in rural areas or cold spots); and existing good practice in using VocTech and digital tools to help narrow inequalities and address barriers to participation.
- Five **stakeholder workshops** with organisations and thought leaders across the adult education sector, investors in the VocTech space, and senior Ufi colleagues. Participants were recruited using Ufi and L&W's existing networks, with the aim of representing a variety of voices across the UK adult education, skills and employment sector. These workshops were conducted online, and were attended by 58 stakeholders in total.

- Seven **focus groups** with learners, non-learners, career changers and learning providers. These included adults with ESOL needs, from refugee/migrant communities, and who are unemployed or in receipt of benefit support. Participants were recruited through L&W and Ufi's existing contacts and through entitledto, an organisation supporting adults to navigate the benefits system. These organisations were purposely selected with the aim of reaching adults from traditionally 'underserved and overlooked' groups. Most focus groups were conducted online, with two taking place face-to-face (with an adult education class in Leicester and an ESOL group in Sheffield). Focus groups were attended by 34 participants in total.
- **In-depth interviews** with seven senior stakeholders from Ufi, L&W, an FE College, industry body and the Federation of Awarding Bodies.

The interviews, workshops and focus groups aimed to explore:

- The key skills adults need to succeed in a changing economy.
- The barriers/exclusionary factors preventing adults from learning to upskill/reskill.
- How far government policy is addressing the barriers and exclusionary factors that prevent learning.
- How technology is currently being used to address these challenges.

The focus groups also explored how adults are currently using technology in their day to day lives outside of learning, in order to understand how to meet individuals where they are and make use of technology they are already comfortable with. All conversations were audio recorded, and detailed notes were taken.



Research findings

This chapter summarises the key themes from our workshops, interviews and focus groups. This includes participant views on the skills needed to succeed in a changing economy, the barriers and exclusionary factors that prevent adults developing the skills they need, how government policy is solving or worsening these barriers, as well as participant views on potential solutions.

Our research has found that the key theme connecting all the barriers is that they are systemic – none are an isolated problem, solvable with a couple of small changes. The education system itself is not functioning in the way that we need it to for a transitioning economy.

1. Investment and funding

A continued lack of investment in skills from governments and employers prevents the learning and skills system adapting to the needs of an economy in transition. In particular without more equal investment, those with lower levels of qualifications and in less well-paid sectors will not have the chance to benefit from learning.

There is strong evidence from stakeholders that the crisis in adult education funding remains a consistent challenge. This encompasses cuts to publicly funded provision as well as the drop in employer investment in skills. Particular individual issues included the cuts to community learning, the fall in individuals attending provision at Level 2 and below, the move to fee paying away from free provision, and the lack of maintenance funding below Level 4, as well as severe challenges for providers around the recruitment and retention of staff. These funding cuts were described as acting unequally on those with lower levels of qualifications and those working in lower paid sectors.

Stakeholders were clear that sustained investment was needed by government and employers, as well as individuals if progress was to be made towards developing the skills we need for an economy in transition. The crisis in adult education funding is a pervasive issue, and these are not new insights, so are not discussed in detail. We have also taken the decision in our problem statements to not focus directly on the need for investment in adult education as we want to develop actions that Ufi, L&W and their partners can achieve. However, we recognise funding is an urgent

issue, and believe in the longer term, some of the challenges we address, such as evidencing the value of adult education to employers and policy makers, could lead to further investment.

Stakeholders also highlighted that the short-term nature of funding meant that projects to support adults into learning were often not sustained, and learning was lost. Innovative approaches require time, risk, and learning from mistakes, which small providers in particular often don't have the financial resources to achieve. Providers also reported large amounts of leadership time spent securing future funding, reducing the time and resources available for innovation.

Investors in the VocTech space also highlighted funding as a barrier to innovation, including an absence of clear funding flows for businesses to invest in training, and a preference amongst investors for backing training solutions for large corporations in 'white-collar' sectors (e.g. in technology or leadership training). The group felt that there were considerably fewer investments in companies reaching lower-qualified adult learners, and that small, innovative ventures face particular challenges with accessing public sector supply chains. Contributing to this challenge is a need to demonstrate commercial rate returns within a relatively short time frame. Supporting those furthest away from employment was viewed as expensive work, with few short-term incentives or benefits for investors. The group discussed whether there was a need for more patience (i.e. accepting a longer time horizon for financial returns) and a broader spectrum of instruments from mission-driven investors (e.g., concessionary loans) to prove that such organisations could deliver satisfactory returns and attract more money into the space.

2. Fragmented skills systems

The fragmented and complex skills system inhibits access to learning. Individuals are unsure of where to look for learning opportunities and which opportunities are best suited to their needs. This prevents the collaborative working needed to address systemic barriers and meet employer and learner needs.

Stakeholders discussed at length the complexity and fragmentation of the current education and skills system. Provision is funded and commissioned by different local and national government departments and agencies across different funding streams, and delivered by a wide range of providers working across different local areas. This fragmentation makes it difficult for individuals and employers to understand what training is available to them, what it can be used for, how it can connect to employment and how it can be funded.

A fragmented and complex skills system is not a new problem. However, the increasing pace of devolution and the emphasis on local tailored solutions (for example through Local Skills Improvement Plans in England) means that finding ways to encourage collaboration and build trust is a more urgent problem than previously.

Most stakeholders were concerned that these issues can prevent adults from accessing learning. Both learners and non-learners who participated in focus groups also discussed the challenges of navigating a complex skills landscape, including not understanding where to go for help, not knowing what qualification or programme was right for them, or how to pay for it. This is exacerbated by what one stakeholder referred to as an “information abundance” whereby there exists so much information online about different opportunities for upskilling that potential learners can find it difficult to know which courses are actually valuable and affordable.

Similarly for employers, there is a broad array of options available for providing learning opportunities for their employees, making it difficult to know which to choose. The training options chosen by one employer may also not be recognised by another, restricting employee’s options to develop transferable skills.

Most focus group participants felt that they needed somewhere that provided trustworthy information on where to find high-quality and respected courses that provide certified qualifications. Individuals with the most positive experiences were those accessing community-based provision – for example, most participants on a Level 1 childcare course in Leicester, which was being delivered at the local mosque, had found out about this informally owing to the providers’ strong community links. However, others commented that they didn’t know what to search for or where to look, and that learning opportunities were often found by chance.

Another issue faced by prospective learners as a result of a fragmented system is that the provision they need is not always available in their local area, and they are not always able to travel or relocate to access it. Those who need to relocate to a new area (e.g. refugees, or prisoners who are moved between areas) may also find that the training they have started is not transferable.

Learner insight

Amina moved to the UK from Pakistan to get married and start a family. She was a qualified pharmacist in her home country and was keen to continue her career in the UK. However, only four universities in England offer the conversion course for overseas pharmacists, and none of them are near where she lives. She has a young family so can’t re-locate or commute a long way. She is frustrated that she is not able to work even though there is a shortage of pharmacists in the UK.

Lack of collaboration between providers can exacerbate these issues. Providers and stakeholders, particularly in England, discussed the challenges of a competitive model, where provision often exists in silos, with a broad range of providers operating independently and avoiding sharing information due to the competitive nature of funding. This makes it difficult for providers to work together to meet employer and individual needs. It was noted that the Scottish’s government’s [Adult Learning Strategy](#), the close relationship between the Welsh government and the adult education sector, and plans in Northern Ireland to bring together all FE colleges under one umbrella organisation represented different ways of more collaborative working than the approach adopted in England.

Stakeholders recognised the need for, and power of, locally tailored solutions which respond to the needs of both local people and the local labour market, and felt that policy makers should trust local authorities to allocate funding in a way that meets local skills needs. However, they also emphasised the importance of avoiding duplication in funding and provision, and ensuring coherent systems and policy learning across different regions and nations. They were keen to see solutions, both through partnership working and technological solutions that would enable policy makers, providers and employers to work together more collaboratively.

Spotlight on...

The [Blended Learning Consortium](#), convened by Heart of Worcestershire College, has been set up to allow FE colleges to create, share, and source high-quality, accredited blended learning resources. Members pay a small annual membership fee, which is used to pay member colleges to develop learning content to agreed specifications and standards. A democratic voting process determines the kinds of resources developed. This project is one example of how collaborative working can succeed in a system where online and blended learning is on the rise.

Spotlight on...

National Numeracy's [Mobiles, Skills & Confidence with Numbers](#) project will enhance the NN Challenge website so that it provides an engaging experience on mobile devices, enabling adult workers to improve their skills without the need for a PC with wi-fi access. The team partnered with Health Education England and The Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) to engage health and social care, and retail and distribution employees to ensure that solutions are effective in settings where staff lack the maths skills and confidence with numbers necessary for their jobs.

3. Changing skills needs

A wide range of evolving skills will be needed for an economy in transition. In order to meet the demand for this changing skill set, we need to make sure our qualification and assessment system is flexible and that we use the right language to talk about skills, focusing on core skills sets.

There was general agreement across participant groups on the skills needed for a transitioning economy, although not always about what to call these skills. Stakeholders talked about skills such as adaptability, resilience, and soft, transversal or core skills, as well as the need for specific technical skills for new economy job roles – notably green skills and digital skills.

A range of 'core' skills were mentioned, including open-mindedness, adaptability, self-reflection, communication, teamwork, curiosity, empathy, resilience (dedication, motivation, commitment), and cognitive skills (critical analysis, problem-solving). These skills were seen as fundamental for success in a modern economy; firstly, for adults to adapt to increasingly complex and uncertain working environments, to understand how their jobs may change, and the future skills they may need; and secondly, to fill the continued demand for caring and creative roles, which cannot be automated or replaced with digital solutions.

Learner insight

Mina was training to be an accountant and identified that in order to be successful in her future career she needed to learn not only technical skills but a much wider set of skills such as resilience and a commitment to lifelong learning. She felt she had developed these skills through formal teaching but also her wider life experience.

Specific vocational skills were also discussed, and participants identified the importance of a flexible educational system that could respond to emerging skills needs in growing sectors as well as those that crosscut across all sectors (e.g. digital and green/sustainability).

However, the challenge of gatekeeper skills and qualifications was also identified. This included needing foundational English, maths, and digital skills before progress could be made to further learning, or career opportunities. Increased investment in basic skills was therefore seen as equally essential as investment in higher technical skills.

A key takeaway from the stakeholder workshops was that in a transitioning economy, lifelong learning policy shouldn't only focus on the specific skills that adults need to acquire. It should also be about enabling people to learn and relearn through their lives, and building their confidence to do so. Stakeholders identified that current vocational learning and training tends to operate using a "restrictive model", where employers train workers for a certain skill set or job role. But in an economy where job roles are shifting, even those in traditional skilled trades (for example, electricians) will need a wider set of competencies to adapt. This requires a shift to an "expansive learning model", which trains workers in skills they may not need now, but may need in the future, and promotes attitudes to learning which mean workers can continually adapt to new job requirements.

To succeed in a transitioning economy and become effective lifelong learners, adults need to be able to (1) identify their existing skills, (2) find opportunities where their skills are relevant, (3) identify any skills gaps they might have, and (4) identify and access training to fill these gaps. However, many people don't recognise the skills they already possess, particularly those who haven't succeeded in conventional educational settings, or who haven't been in education for a long time. Equally, many don't recognise their current skills gaps. For those who have been out of the workforce for a number of years (e.g., those who have been in prison or in and out of mental health services), requirements have changed radically since they last applied for a job. These people often don't know where to start in terms of identifying or understanding the skills they need for work.

Spotlight on...

The [University of Derby](#) is developing a series of integrated modules to support unqualified healthcare workers access to nursing assistant apprenticeships, applying existing game-based learning technology to develop cross-platform content. These will focus on the pain points that deter people from accessing a Trainee Nursing Associate apprenticeship, with support for confidence and core skills from becoming aware of the opportunity, developing confidence to apply, reactivating dormant skills and creating new functional skills.

Another theme across these discussions was the importance of using the right language to talk about skills. This included the value placed on different skills and occupations, so avoiding terms such as low skilled, avoiding generalisations, and ensuring common understandings of terms such as core or green skills. For example, an increasing need for 'green skills' in our transitioning economy was identified, but stakeholders acknowledged that these are difficult to define in a way that is understood by individuals and employers. Interviewees discussed the need to ensure that all skills sets were valued, and suggested, for example, moving away from talking about low skilled occupations to recognising these roles as high resilience. Equally people coming into employment who experience exclusionary factors such as care experienced young people should be recognised as having survival skills rather than being seen in terms of deficit.

Using inconsistent language to describe skills can also present further barriers to adults in trying to market themselves effectively in a shifting job market. E-portfolios were identified as a potential way of allowing people to market their skills in a simpler and more accessible way.

Spotlight on...

The Gatsby Foundation has partnered with other education and skills organisations to launch a ['Skills Builder Universal Framework'](#), which aims to define eight essential skills for employment. The framework can be used by employers, employees and young people to develop and describe the 'transferable essential skills which 'almost everyone needs to do almost any job.'

Concerns were also raised around systems being too slow to adapt to emerging skills needs, for example, apprenticeship standards which take a long time to develop or review. Additionally, there was a perceived mismatch between the qualifications and assessment system and the skills needed for a transitioning economy. Qualifications and apprenticeship standards were viewed as too focused on end-point assessment and too slow to adapt to emerging skills needs. Some also felt that the qualification requirements for some skill-shortage sectors, such as childcare, are too high to reflect the pay, locking out potential candidates.

Qualification requirements can create further barriers to employment or career change for certain groups. For example, stakeholders highlighted that there are large numbers of middle-aged and older workers who are in highly skilled roles, but

who do not hold formal qualifications that reflect their skills. This means it is difficult for these individuals to move to a new workplace without returning to education to take new qualifications. Some workshop participants expressed support for the [DWP's 'Midlife MOT'](#) initiative, designed to help workers in their 40s and 50s to take stock of their finances, skills, and health, as a way to support adults to reskill throughout their working lives. However, they were keen for Midlife MOTs to offer holistic support rather than be focused on maximising pension contributions.

Many migrant workers can be left in a similar position as, while they may be qualified in their home country, their qualifications are not always recognised in the UK. This issue was identified by several focus group participants who had migrated to the UK, who were well educated and qualified in their home countries but had been unable to continue in these careers here -including as doctors and pharmacists.

Suggested solutions to these issues included a focus on creating more flexible learning pathways, through more portable qualifications and the use of micro-credentials to help workers quickly and flexibly gain new employability skills and fill knowledge gaps. However, stakeholders also noted the challenge of adding another layer of complexity to the existing qualification and skills system through more flexible forms of assessment.

Spotlight on...

The RSA has partnered with Navigatr to develop [Cities of Learning](#), which makes use of 'digital badging' to give learners a portable, online record of their achievement, and employers a new way to connect with talent in cities. The badges are designed to be shared on social media and online CVs, and are awarded for a range of achievements, including skills mastery, volunteering, and gaining qualifications. The badges contain data on the issuer and the skills and knowledge developed (and at what level), all of which can be digitally verified in real-time.



4. Learner barriers

Pervasive learning barriers persist and remain unaddressed, limiting our ability to prepare for an economy in transition. There is a failure to speak to real motivations and confidence to learn, as well address more practical barriers such as cost, time, transport, and childcare that have been worsened by the cost-of-living crisis.

The barriers to learning raised by stakeholders and focus group participants are pervasive, and therefore not unfamiliar. These include dispositional barriers, such as a lack of confidence and motivation to learn, and also situational barriers, including cost, time, transport, and childcare.

However, stakeholders recognised that the cost-of-living crisis has exacerbated these barriers and made learning (and associated costs such as internet access, transport, and childcare) less affordable to many. Focus group participants also reflected on the impact of the cost-of-living crisis, with some stating that they aren't able to enrol on a course if it isn't free or funded because of the rising prices of basic needs.

It has become particularly difficult for those relying on Universal Credit to access learning opportunities. As summarised by one workshop participant, *"nobody would even think about coming off Universal Credit, particularly in a cost-of-living crisis, to engage in a learning programme"*. However, current circumstances also make it difficult for adults who are working to engage in learning, particularly where this requires them to take time off or go part-time. Skills Bootcamps were highlighted as one initiative which, while designed specifically to support adults to reskill, are inaccessible to those who cannot afford to take time out of work, since they require full-time attendance. Some stakeholders also felt that the cost-of-living crisis is resulting in short-term thinking, where adults see investing financially in their career by upskilling or reskilling as unrealistic when they have bills to pay and children to feed. Reskilling into a new sector may also require people to go back into a more junior (and therefore lower-paid) job role, something that is unfeasible for many.

Through consulting with experts with front-line experience working with under-served and overlooked groups, as well as with learners and non-learners themselves, we gained an understanding of how barriers to learning can be experienced by different and intersecting groups. Chwarae Teg, a charity supporting women in Wales, highlighted the specific challenges for women who cannot afford cars and have limited access to public transport in accessing learning. These women may not be able to access daytime courses due to work and childcare responsibilities, and may be restricted from accessing evening courses since they don't feel safe in public spaces after dark. A focus group of migrant women in Leicester highlighted childcare as a particular challenge for them, with most saying that they had needed to miss or leave class at some point to respond to a call from school. They noted that childcare was particularly challenging for them when their extended families were not in the country to support with childcare.

A number of focus group participants had ESOL needs, and saw these as presenting a range of additional barriers. These included meeting the English language requirements for certain courses, having the confidence to engage in learning, understanding course content, and accessing online content. Participants taking part in an ESOL conversation group in Sheffield identified having money to pay for courses as a key challenge. This may reflect challenges for individuals with ESOL needs in accessing information about funding for learning – participants had little understanding of what their entitlement to learning was, and one woman felt that only people with money could afford to learn.

Tailored and individualised support was viewed as key to addressing these barriers. Stakeholders highlighted that the barriers which people face are often specific to the individual, which makes broad-brush solutions less effective. Instead, professional support must be sustained throughout an individual's life to enable them to continue with lifelong learning. Focus group participants also identified the individual support they had received from their course tutors as vital in developing their confidence and helping them to overcome challenges and sustain their learning.

Workshop and focus group participants felt that technology had the potential to address barriers to learning through offering individuals the opportunity to learn in their own time and at their own pace, thus allowing them to develop essential digital skills alongside other learning, as well as supporting less confident learners who may be nervous in a classroom environment.

Spotlight on...

During the Covid-19 pandemic, homelessness charity [St Mungo's](#) found that digital learning projects were well-received by their clients, since it enabled them to learn flexibly in any location. They identified several success factors for effectively engaging their clients online, including:

- 1) Learning in bite-sized chunks that can be stopped and started (addressing barriers around limited time and concentration)
- 2) Minimal use of text
- 3) Use of games, stories, videos and narration to support clients with literacy and ESOL needs
- 4) Delivering the first session in person to build confidence and set expectations around the course

Using technology that individuals are already familiar with was seen as an important way of addressing barriers. From a learner and practitioner perspective, this removes the additional barrier of having to familiarise themselves with a new platform, particularly if they lack digital confidence and skills. From an investment perspective, this helps to build solutions that are scalable and cost effective. In the learner focus groups, we found that while some adult learners say they lack digital skills, most are comfortable with using smartphones. Migrant women in Leicester spoke about how they used mobile phone apps, including WhatsApp, TikTok, and Facebook, to communicate with their children, and used mobile phone translators to assist them in everyday activities such as shopping. These women generally felt less confident using laptops, although they also recognised the importance

of developing these skills for work and in their daily lives, since ‘everything is online now’.

Learner insight

Level 1 Childcare learners in Leicester (all of whom were migrant women with ESOL needs) described how they had set up a class WhatsApp group where they could informally support each other and ask questions. Their tutor also created an email account which students are told they can email any time, with any questions. Learners felt that this helped to develop their confidence to learn.

Recognising these benefits, it was also identified that for adults facing significant barriers to learning, in-person support is essential. Both learners and stakeholders favoured a hybrid approach to incorporating tech solutions into learning, where tech is used to enhance, rather than replace, the role of the practitioner. While the flexibility that technology offered was viewed as helpful for addressing barriers related to time, childcare, and transport, migrant women in Leicester also highlighted the benefits of being able to come to a classroom to learn, since they knew they wouldn't be disturbed or be required to juggle learning and childcare.

5. Digital Divide

Digital skills and digital access are essential for work and learning. The digital divide impacts individuals, trainers and organisations. While the Covid-19 pandemic widened access to online and blended learning, we need to ensure this opportunity is open to all by using accessible technologies, building confidence and digital skills.

While the digital divide is not new, pre-existing inequalities have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis and impacted the uptake of digital technology and online learning. This has meant that while some individuals are doing more types of learning supported by digital tools, many are further from accessing digital devices or being digitally connected.

Digital skills were identified by participants as essential for work and learning, as well as more broadly for everyday life (for example, for claiming jobseekers' allowance, keeping in contact with children's schools, or making medical appointments). For work, these skills are needed to search for and apply for jobs, which now generally takes place online, as well as being an essential component of job roles across almost all sectors. This includes sectors where digital skills were traditionally not required, but are increasingly becoming essential to drive innovation and growth, including manufacturing and construction. Stakeholders also recognised the growing importance of the digital sector in the UK economy, and the opportunities that it provides for high quality and sustainable employment. This is identified as a growth sector by a number of local authorities; however,

without advanced digital skills and the confidence to pursue roles in tech, adults can be locked out of these opportunities.

Spotlight on...

EY Foundation, a charitable foundation supporting young people from low-income backgrounds into employment, is keen to ensure that the job opportunities presented by advances in technology are accessible to the young people they support. They currently embed basic digital skills into their employability programmes, and run a programme called Tech Futures to expose young people to careers in the tech industry. They are also conducting research with young people to gain feedback on potential barriers to careers in tech.

Stakeholders viewed a lack of basic digital skills as a significant barrier to accessing learning and high-quality employment. They discussed how adults can often be unaware that they lack digital skills or of the digital skills they need, particularly if they don't wish to work in a tech-related field. It was felt that both young people and adults lack the right opportunities to develop the digital skills needed for work and life, and that these skills need to be further prioritised within the skills agenda. The expansion of the Essential Digital Skills Framework in England, putting digital skills on a par with literacy and numeracy, was therefore welcomed.

Stakeholders felt that, as well as a focus on developing digital skills, confidence and motivation must also be addressed as many excluded groups lack the confidence to get online, and have concerns about online safety (e.g. entering their bank details online). This finding was reflected in the focus groups with a number of participants stating that they lacked digital skills and confidence, including how to use laptops and computers, conduct online research, and search and apply for relevant learning and work opportunities. This lack of confidence is further exacerbated for those who feel their English language skills are low, particularly for migrant groups who do not have English as their first language. Others already possessed some basic digital skills but found it challenging to find a course to further develop these skills which was not too advanced.

Learner insight

Anne has worked at a bank for 37 years. She would now like to change career, but is finding this challenging as she lacks general computer skills and doesn't use social media, and most information about job opportunities is now online. Sources such as the Open University are off-putting due to the need for computer skills to learn online.

A lack of digital skills is compounded by issues around digital access and data poverty, particularly for those who experience exclusionary factors. Stakeholders pointed out that groups on lower incomes may not have access to an internet connection, mobile data or even a device. This almost inevitably leads to digital exclusion from learning and work opportunities. The cost-of-living crisis makes this issue even more pertinent. Even if providers can teach disadvantaged individuals the digital skills they need to succeed in the modern economy, they won't necessarily have the tools to apply these.

Besides cost-related barriers, adults based in rural locations also face barriers related to a lack of infrastructure. A lack of fast internet and strong social infrastructure can make it difficult for residents to take the first step towards improving their digital skills. This can be compounded by poor transport links, which make it difficult for individuals to travel to public spaces with internet provision, such as libraries.

Learner insight

Members of an ESOL conversation group in Sheffield were generally confident using technology, but identified cost barriers. One participant said that they couldn't afford to replace their laptop, which was broken. Another did not have internet at home and was relying on mobile data.

Stakeholders viewed tackling this digital divide as essential, recognising how a lack of both digital skills and access (with one often compounding the other) can lock the most disadvantaged adults out of the opportunities presented by advances in technology. This was framed as an "empowerment divide", whereby adults from digitally underserved groups have less access to careers in digital and STEM due to not having the resources, assets, or infrastructure. Digital inclusion is a devolved policy area, with each UK nation having their own strategy, and activity to address these issues at a policy level is therefore disjointed. Scotland and Wales' digital inclusion strategies were seen as more effectively addressing barriers around access. By contrast, England's digital inclusion strategy has not been updated since 2014, and the Essential Digital Skills framework is seen as doing little to address issues around inclusion.

Spotlight on...

[Digital Economy Skills Action Plan 2023-2028](#), developed with partners working across Scotland's digital economy, this Digital Economy Skills Action Plan (DESAP) draws on research, insight, and expertise to highlight the digital economy skills opportunities which will support Scotland's economic vision of becoming a wellbeing economy: thriving across economic, social, and environmental dimensions, and one that delivers economic prosperity for all Scotland's people and place.

Stakeholders recognised that the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated tech adoption for learning. However, they also identified that because parts of the education sector can be relatively slow to adopt digital technology compared with other industries, some of the progress made during the pandemic is now being lost, and there is a failure to take advantage of lessons learned.

This was seen as particularly the case for small community organisations who do not have the resources to invest in new technologies, provide individuals with equipment or upskill staff who themselves lack digital skills. This is worsened by fragmentation in the VocTech market which can make it difficult for both employers and providers to identify appropriate platforms. There is no easy way to compare different platforms and few, if any, universal platforms that can allow a provider to buy from one source and then give students and trainers single points of secure access. Using familiar proprietary technologies can be one way to address the barriers experienced by some organisations and individual learners, however, the privacy and data security issues of using these technologies needs to be acknowledged.

Learner insight

Social Media Marketing learners in London described how they used different technologies to support their learning in different ways. This included lessons delivered over Zoom, YouTube videos that they watched to reinforce their learning, and a group chat which they described as an offline classroom where they could share ideas and get feedback on their work. They felt secure in using these familiar platforms and felt they had a good understanding of what technology worked best for what purpose.

6. Value of learning

The true value of adult learning is still not fully understood by individuals or employers, while providers and policy makers do not have access to high quality evidence of what works. Unless individuals and employers can be motivated to invest in learning, other adjustments to the skills systems will fail.

Stakeholders identified that the case for the value of adult learning had still not been convincingly made to all employers or many potential learners. This was due to a failure of communication as well as a lack of evidence. Again, this is not a new insight but has increased urgency if those who are furthest from learning are to be encouraged to reskill and upskill.

This meant that individuals were not motivated to invest time and money in training. Stakeholders felt that while those working in the adult education sector were clear on the benefits of adult learning, these benefits were not obvious to those furthest from learning. They talked about the need to find ways to reach those for whom learning was not even a consideration but also those for whom the opportunity cost of reskilling was too high. Stakeholders identified the need for a clearer “cost-benefit analysis” for learners who were considering whether to reskill or upskill to demonstrate the financial and wider benefits of learning.

Learner insight

A worker in the construction industry was keen to re-train in a new and less physically demanding sector. However, the cost of retraining, particularly the potential loss of salary was too high in comparison to what he perceived as the more uncertain benefits of reskilling.

Stakeholders identified that communicating the value of adult learning should involve strategies such as using aspirational role models, and using informal networks of friends and family to champion learning. However, they also identified that structural change was needed, for example the disconnect between DfE and DWP meant Universal Credit claimants were much less likely to be convinced to engage in learning.

Stakeholders also felt that the sector had failed to effectively communicate the value of adult learning in its broadest sense to all employers. Some stakeholders believed that an 'I coach, you poach' mentality amongst small employers in particular was preventing them from investing in training, as they did not see the wider value of training. It also meant that businesses were investing in low hanging fruit rather than the kinds of upskilling that could be transformational. This was particularly the case for employees who were lower paid and had lower levels of qualifications.

It was identified that businesses have been impacted by economic factors, including those caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the energy crisis. As a result, many were now operating in 'survival mode', and less inclined to invest in training that wasn't seen as immediately beneficial to the business. However, some stakeholders felt that current labour market pressures created an opportunity to convince employers of the value in investing in staff training, as long as the right messaging was used.

Stakeholders therefore felt that there needed to be a culture shift for both individuals and employers to understand that reskilling and upskilling are a normal cycle in employment. This was linked to the need to move from a restrictive to an expansive learning model.

Spotlight on...

An [evaluation of Ufi's grant-funded activity](#) from 2015-2019 found that Ufi grant funding has evoked behavioural and attitudinal change in organisations and across their networks. It has often been fundamental in encouraging attitudinal change within organisations towards technology in general or technical learning solutions specifically. Several indicated that the grant enabled them to test out innovative solutions and ways of working that might not otherwise have been possible.

In addition to better communication with employers and individuals, stakeholders identified that better evidence was needed around what works for adult learning. Some of those working in the sector felt that better quantitative evidence for policy makers could help to make the case for increased investment in adult learning.

Alongside this, it was felt that detailed evidence was needed for those providing and commissioning delivery so they could develop the right kind of provision to deliver the best outcomes. One instance of the lack of evidence in the sector was that Westminster government had invested in What Works Centres for schools and Higher Education but not for the adult education sector.

The move to devolved systems was identified as presenting opportunities to build evidence of what is needed and what works at a local level. However, creating a strong evidence base of what skills were needed, where and how to address them was a substantial and time consuming programme of ongoing work for mayoral combined authorities and local authorities. Stakeholders were keen to find collaborative and technological solutions so that evidence could be collected more easily and communicated more clearly.

Spotlight on...

Nesta's [Open Jobs Observatory](#) is one example of how digital technology can be used to map skills demands across different regions of the UK. It collects job adverts, extracts variables including skills and location and creates data visualisations of skills demands.



Conclusions

Our research findings shed light on a wide range of insights from sector leaders, individuals, employers and practitioners. The findings describe some of the biggest challenges in adult learning and lay out some of the steps necessary to ensuring every adult can participate in lifelong learning within the context of an economy that is rapidly transitioning.

Working closely together, Ufi and L&W have sought to answer through sector wide consultation on the following question:

"How can Ufi, their partners and VocTech (technology that supports vocational learning) help narrow inequalities and ensure every adult can participate in learning throughout their working lives, so that the UK has the skills it needs for an economy in transition?"

We are now starting the process of considering what steps we can take together; and to that end we have defined three problem statements. These problem statements set out the areas where we have found some of the knottiest problems, where we have the capacity to act, and where solving the challenge is key to building a skills system fit for a transitioning economy.

Problem Statements

Our three problem statements are not new problems: however, they are problems in the new and emerging skills context of the 2020s. One of the lenses that we've applied to our understanding of these problems is a distinction between the perspectives of adults excluded from or trying to participate in learning and the functioning of the broader system itself. During the consultation on this Green Paper, we will seek to further define these problems, identifying the key areas that we can work to address through a focused programme of work.

In the White Paper, Ufi will lay out the steps that we will take with our partners to address the identified problems. This will include new strands of work with our strategic partners, an advocacy campaign and a new grant call looking to support digital solutions to some of the thorniest issues in adult learning.

Any solutions that we pursue must reflect the 'new normal' of constant change in the skills landscape. Solutions must be responsive to local and employer need whilst not propagating greater fragmentation, they must speak a common language that does not exclude certain individuals and they must bake in digital solutions that support people where they already are.

1. The **skills** for an economy transition

The skills and learning opportunities that are needed to support an economy in transition are neither clear nor equitably accessible. We need to inspire adults and employers into learning and clearly communicate the benefits to policy makers. We need to ensure providers have the evidence of what works.

There is no common language of skills, and a limited evidence base of the skills the UK economy needs. Learning throughout life to support work and careers is often not seen as valuable by many workers, employers, or policy makers. Our research showed that an increasing number of jobs will require what our participants called core skills, soft skills, thinking skills, or 'being human' skills. Without these skills adults will be locked out of good jobs, but we don't yet have an agreed vocabulary to talk about them.

We need to build a methodologically stronger evidence base for what works and for who in adult learning, and agree a common language to talk about and value skills, and quality jobs. This is not a new problem, but it has a new urgency if we are to ensure that employers, individuals, and policymakers are prepared to invest in the upskilling and reskilling that we need for our economy.

We need to shift the narrative so that employers, individuals, and policy makers have access to the best evidence, understand and can communicate the value of learning throughout life. This means both embracing risk and learning from failure but also considering how more systematic approaches to evaluation can be applied across the learning and skills sector. In terms of language, this means moving away from terminology such as 'low skilled' to recognise and value all the constantly evolving skills our economy needs.

Individual lens – How can we ensure that adults who need to reskill for their own careers and also their broader health and wellbeing, particularly those who are not well served by mainstream provision, are encouraged and supported to learn? How do we then ensure that we are using the right language and the right evidence when communicating the benefits of learning and skills to different groups?

Systems lens – How do we ensure that providers, employers, and policy makers have the evidence they need to make informed decisions about adult education and skills needs? How do we support policy makers, local authorities and providers to ensure qualifications and assessments reflect changing skills needs? How do we ensure the learning and skills system supports and links up with other policy objectives, such as the transition to net zero?

2. Skills **system** for an economy in transition

The current skills system is fragmented and is failing to keep pace with a shifting landscape. We need a more collaborative and integrated skills system to benefit from devolution, place based learning, growing online and blended learning offers, and the changing mix of national policy and local leadership. We need to better align the system to developments in regeneration, infrastructure, health and social care.

The UK's adult skills system is fragmented, in delivery, design, funding and geography. Short termism and a focus on initiatives have created new pressures for skills leaders and fail to address the systemic challenges that are causing problems for employers, individuals and the UK as a whole.

For individuals this presents barriers to overcome when trying to access adult learning and skills, felt most acutely by those who are distant from mainstream provision, and magnified by the cost-of-living crisis. For providers, employers and the wider system, fragmentation limits collaboration with various actors working in isolation and competing with each other. The system fails to foster trust in each other's capacity to deliver, hinders sharing between organisations and individuals and therefore hampers shared innovation.

The current drive towards greater devolution and a bigger focus on delivering learning in 'place' is welcome but means the challenges of fragmentation, and the lack of collaboration and trust are at risk of only getting worse. We know that both devolution and place-based delivery are positive innovations that offer individuals greater control over learning that is likely to be more relevant and engaging. However, we do still need to consider how these positive measures are balanced with a need to not complicate or drive the system into further fragmentation.

We recognise that the skills system will always be complex and fragmented, with a flow of new policies and initiatives, a range of actors, and a balance of competing interests. We want to explore how we can build more collaborative relationships that can bridge these fragmentations, and how we can ensure the system works as a coherent whole whilst also meeting local employer and individual needs.

Our research shows us that there are two lenses through which we can see this problem:

Individual lens – How do we better help individuals who face barriers accessing mainstream learning provision, or require new skills, to navigate a fragmented learning and skills system? How does public policy, including adult skills, employment support, health and social care better join up to support individuals? In the context of a system where a significant number of people access learning through their employers, how do we connect more people to funding and provision that meets both their needs and those of their employers, without trying to over describe and map an endlessly evolving ecosystem?

Systems lens – How do we make the most of a world made up of a mix of devolution and place-based adult learning, national policy and delivery, along with an increasing array of online and blended learning options, while supporting individuals' health and wellbeing? Given that system fragmentation will always exist, how do we ensure that practitioners, providers, employers, other public services, and local authorities have opportunities to work collaboratively to build a learning and skills system that supports not just individual learning and skills but also community health and wellbeing?

3. Digital technology for an economy in transition

Faced with a changing world, we are not acting fast enough to adopt and embed the technology necessary to creating accessible lifelong learning. We need to develop and deploy better technology to provide learning offers that fit around work and home life, building resilient learners while embedding a culture of lifelong learning.

Our research and experience shows that digital tools have a unique and positive role to play in supporting adult learning. We know that the right tools, in the right context deployed for the right people can make an enormous difference.

However, the new context of our transitioning economy raises new questions about the role, capacity and function of digital technology. The most important question for us is how technology can support individuals who will need to change career more often, reskill and upskill in response to a fast-changing world of work and extend their working and learning lives beyond our current norms.

Ufi already knows ‘what works’ in digital design for individuals, including those furthest away from learning, or in digital poverty. This learning now needs to be applied to the specific problem of enabling learning through life, and ensuring that technology can support a new world of learning that is responsive and adaptive to the emerging new world of work.

This problem can also be seen with two distinct lenses:

Individual lens – How can we better develop and deploy digital technology that engages adults and supports their learning, so that we improve access at all levels and support individuals at every point in their life? In a world where we are working for longer, dipping in and out of education throughout our lives, how can technology support individuals to build both the skills they need to be resilient to change, and provide the tools they need to manage these changes?

Systems lens – How do we ensure that the digital solutions and pedagogies that we already know work are developed and deployed where needed? How do we encourage innovation through the simplest solutions from known platforms? How can we ensure that even the smallest learning organisations or employers have the capacity to deliver high quality learning and skills without over-building technological solutions to their skills challenges? How can we build a better understanding of what works where evidence is lacking?

About Ufi VocTech Trust & Learning and Work Institute



Ufi VocTech Trust is an independent charity. Our aim is to help improve vocational skills in the UK's workforce by funding digital solutions for vocational learning. We do this by providing funding and expertise to organisations developing and deploying tech for use in adult vocational education.

We are a charity which has provided over £25m to over 280 organisations and invested over £3.2m in ventures developing technology and digital tools for adult learners. In the last year, our funding has impacted over 1,000,000 learners in sectors across the entire breadth of the UK's economy.

We champion the power of technology to improve skills for work and deliver better outcomes for all. We act as a funding partner and advocate for innovators in skills development, looking to help people progress in the workplace.

We want to see a fundamental shift in how individuals, employers, and UK society view, embrace and benefit from vocational skills development through digital innovation. With the UK facing an unprecedented skills crisis, we know that technology has the capacity to improve how adults across the country get the skills they need now and for the future of work.

ufi.co.uk



Learning and Work Institute is an independent policy, research and development organisation dedicated to lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion.

We research what works, develop new ways of thinking and implement new approaches. Working with partners, we transform people's experiences of learning and employment. What we do benefits individuals, families, communities and the wider economy.

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Appendix

Acknowledgements

With special thanks to WEA, Savte, and entitledto for helping bring together the focus groups. And with special thanks to our workshop participants, including:

Helen Cuthbert (AELP)	Ginny Page (Gatsby)
Andy Erwich (AELP)	Hannah Whelan (Good Things Foundation)
Matt Rhodes (AOC)	Polly Morgan (iDEA Foundation)
Reina Yaidoo (Bassajamba)	Paul McKean (Jisc)
Melanie Hayes (Bethnal Green Ventures)	Tom Onions (Maximus)
Sarah Faber (Big Issue Invest)	Michael Lemin (NCFE)
Hannah Kirkbride (Career Matters)	Isabel Newman (NESTA)
David Hinton (Catch-22)	Lisa Morrison-Coulthard (NFER)
Isabel Jones (Catch-22)	Emma Selinger (Resolution Foundation)
Victoria Geroe (CBI)	Tom Kenyon (The RSA)
Kim Chaplain (Centre for Ageing Better)	Siobhan Moore (SIS Ventures)
Hayley Dunne (Chwarae Teg)	Chloe Knight (St Mungo's)
Bethan Collins (CIPD Wales)	Nick Kind (Tyton Partners)
Debbie Carlton (Dynamic Knowledge)	Professor Ellen Boeren (University of Glasgow)
Olly Newton (Edge Foundation)	Sharon Wagg (University of Sheffield)
Vikki Liogier (Education and Training Foundation)	Michael Lewis (West Midlands Combined Authority)
Sarah Belhay (EY Foundation)	
Karen Daws (Federation of Awarding Bodies)	

Literature Review

This appendix presents the findings of a rapid review of existing research, academic literature, and good practice to address the following research question:

How can VocTech (technology that supports vocational learning) help narrow inequalities and ensure every adult can participate in learning throughout their working lives, so that the UK has the skills it needs for an economy in transition?

The context for this research question is that the UK economy is in transition, requiring changing skills through increasing digitalisation and automation, the move to net zero, an ageing workforce, Brexit, and the post pandemic workforce changes.

The devolution of the education and skills system to England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and within England further devolution to combined authorities means that policy and actors are working in different ways in different local areas. However there are common themes across the UK that impact on adult participation in learning, how far the UK can develop the skills it needs for an economy in transition and the role of VocTech in supporting learners, employers and providers in this transition. These include the current context of the labour market, funding cuts and falling participation rates for adult education, adult barriers to learning and current good practice with digital technology.

Labour market context

This section addresses the effect of key labour market trends on skills demand and the skills that the UK needs for equitable growth.

Key labour market trends and challenges resulting in the need to upskill/reskill

The UK is currently facing a number of critical labour market challenges. These include the continuing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic but also longer term trends, such as advances in technology, demographic change, political factors and the UK's transition to a net zero economy.⁴

While unemployment rose due to the Covid-19 pandemic, job vacancies are now at record levels.⁵ Over the last year while unemployment has fallen, economic inactivity has increased.⁶ This is primarily driven by long term sickness and disability, and older workers (age 50+) leaving the workforce at a higher rate than previous years.⁷ Young adults and those from Black and other Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups are also more likely to experience labour market disadvantage, including unemployment and long-term inactivity.⁸

⁴ Department of Education (2022), [Labour market and skills demand: horizon scanning and scenarios](#)

⁵ Learning and Work Institute (2022), [Reskilling for career change](#)

⁶ House of Commons (2023), [UK labour market statistics](#)

⁷ Brader (2022), [Older workers in the UK](#)

⁸ Department of Education (2022), [Labour market and skills demand: horizon scanning and scenarios](#)

Political and socio-cultural factors, such as Brexit, future immigration policy and political instability, are exacerbating the high number of job vacancies, making it more difficult to attract workers with key skills.⁹ Uncertainty about future migration changes means that immigration policy will play a key role in determining the ability to gain skilled workers.

Advances in technology and automation are expected to have wide-ranging impacts on jobs and skill requirements in the UK. While technology will not necessarily replace workers, it will cause a shift in tasks performed in job roles, and certain activities will become more automated; it is estimated that UK workers with incomes in the lowest 20% are three times more likely to face a risk of automation than workers with incomes in the highest 20%.¹⁰ Education and training will need to be adapted to address these changes in technology. A similar effect will occur as the UK transitions to a net zero economy by 2050.¹¹ The shift to net zero will generate changes to existing jobs, create new jobs, and grow current 'green' jobs. Education and workplace training will need to support the existing workforce in developing and updating 'green' skills.

An ageing population and increased life expectancy also means that people are expected to work for longer and so will need to upskill and reskill more, over the course of their working lives.

Existing skills gaps

The UK's improvement in skills has stalled, and we are falling behind international competitors in both technical and basic adult skills.¹² This is already impacting on our productivity and growth, and will become increasingly problematic in the context of the future of work, and the skills needed for an economy in transition.

Forecasts of the future of work suggest that as technology becomes more embedded in the workforce, analytical skills e.g., problem solving, innovation and critical thinking, as well as interpersonal skills e.g., communication and collaboration, will be in highest demand in the next 15 years and beyond.¹³ Other necessary wider skills include self-management, such as flexibility and self-motivation, as well as emotional intelligence, such as ethics and empathy. Echoing this, the Industrial Strategy Council¹⁴ report that the UK workforce is most likely to require basic digital skills, core management skills, STEM workplace skills and teaching and training skills in 2030. The Local Government Association (LGA) reported that 82% of all jobs currently advertised online require basic Microsoft skills.¹⁵

NFER's forecasts of the future of work also suggest that new jobs will increasingly require qualifications above Level 4. However, there are many adults in the UK who do not have any qualifications: the latest available census data shows that 18% in

⁹ Department of Education (2022), [Labour market and skills demand: horizon scanning and scenarios](#).

¹⁰ National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) (2022), [The Skills Imperative 2035: what does the literature tell us about essential skills most needed for work?](#)

¹¹ Department for Education (2022), [Labour market and skills demand: horizon scanning and scenarios](#)

¹² Learning and Work Institute (2019), [Time for Action: Skills for economic growth and social justice](#)

¹³ National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) (2022), [The Skills Imperative 2035: what does the literature tell us about essential skills most needed for work?](#)

¹⁴ Industrial Strategy Council (2019), [UK Skills Mismatch in 2030](#)

¹⁵ Local Government Association (2022), [Place based adult skills and training](#)

England and Wales¹⁶, 24% in Northern Ireland¹⁷ and 27% in Scotland¹⁸ respectively of those aged over sixteen report having no qualifications. Equally, an estimated 9 million working-age adults in England and Northern Ireland¹⁹ have low basic skills in literacy or numeracy, of which 5 million have low skills in both.

While the UK skills system is efficient in developing graduates, it is currently experiencing significant skills gaps at higher technical levels (lacking technicians, engineers or health and social care professionals) and lacking quality technical skills required by employers.²⁰ While Westminster government policy is currently focussing on developing higher technical, digital and green skills, these still need to be underpinned by wider essential, transferable skills in the future workforce.

Current workers recognise that they need to develop new skills in order to succeed in the future world of work. According to L&W's 2021 Adult Participation in Learning Survey^{20b}, around a third (34%) of adults want to change their job or career within the next two years and almost seven in 10 (69%) of these adults believe that they would need to develop their skills in order to do so.

Funding and participation

Government investment in adult education has fallen substantially in recent years. For example, in England funding is set to be £1 billion lower in 2025 than in 2010.²¹ This has led to falling participation in adult education and a move towards fee paying courses. The fall in government spending has been mirrored by a fall in employer investment in skills and training. Employers have a critical role in funding adult education; they invested £42 billion (including the wage costs of those on training) in skills in 2019 and 61% of employers provided training. However, employer investment in skills has been falling after a decade of low growth following the financial crisis and recent economic uncertainty with the number of days employee spend training currently at its lowest since 2011.²²

Against these falls in funding and participation, there has been a recent increase in informal and independent learning, meaning that participation in learning appears to have increased since the Covid-19 pandemic and has now returned to levels last seen in the 2000's. The latest 2022 Adult Participation in Learning Survey²³ shows that just over one in five adults (22 per cent) say they are currently learning, with a further one in five (19 per cent) saying they have done some learning within the last three years.

It is important to note that across government funded, employer funded and independent learning, adult participation levels decline with age and distance from

¹⁶ Office of National Statistics (2021), [Education, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

¹⁷ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) (2021), [Census 2021 main statistics qualifications tables](#)

¹⁸ Scotland's Census (2021), [Flexible table builder](#)

¹⁹ Learning and Work Institute (2021), [Getting the basics right: The case for action on adult basic skills](#)

²⁰ Department for Education (2021), [Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth](#)

^{20b} Learning and Work Institute (2021), [Adult Participation in Learning Survey](#)

²¹ Learning and Work Institute (2022), [Stark social class and regional divides in adult learning put at risk Government's growth and 'levelling up' plans](#)

²² Learning and Work Institute (2021), [Employer investment in skills](#)

²³ Learning and Work Institute (2022), [Adult Participation in Learning Survey](#)

the labour market, and are lowest for those with fewer or no formal qualifications.²⁴ Although there has been a recent government focus on free access for adults over the age of 19 to skills for shortage occupations at Level 3 and above through the “Level 3 Free Courses for Jobs” and “Skills Bootcamps”²⁵, providers report concerns over eligibility with learners either under or over-qualified against the course requirements. There are persistent gaps in affordable Level 1 and 2 courses.²⁶

Barriers to learning for adults to upskill/reskill

Adults in the UK face a wide range of barriers that prevent them from participating in and/or sustaining learning, including individual and system-wide barriers. Both Ufi and L&W have explored these barriers extensively in their past research. This literature review does not seek to repeat what has already been considered in those pieces, but aims to summarise and collate that thinking, highlighting where in the context of our current VocTech Challenge these insights remain relevant or gain new relevance.

Individual barriers

Individual barriers to learning are typically classified into two, often multi-levelled and interrelated, types: situational and dispositional barriers.²⁷ Situational barriers arise from an adult’s personal and family situation, and commonly include: costs, childcare or caring responsibilities, work or other time pressures, lacking appropriate working environments, and lack of digital access. Dispositional barriers relate to the attitudes, perceptions and expectations of adults and commonly include: lack of confidence; lack of interest or conflicts of interest in learning; feelings of guilt; feeling too old; not knowing what learning is available or how to find out about learning opportunities; and past negative experiences of learning.

Situational barriers

- **Cost** barriers include direct and indirect costs incurred through learning, such as course fees, costs of materials and resources, or travel expenses. This barrier is particularly salient for those on lower incomes.²⁸
- **Childcare** is a significant barrier, where high costs can result in a lack of childcare support and increased time-related barriers, especially for women.²⁹ While men and women have relatively equal participation rates in adult learning, parenting disproportionately affects women as they are more likely to be disrupted by caring responsibilities or competing time demands.³⁰ Men are more likely to take part in learning in formal job-related settings and benefit from structures, supports and validation of work.³¹

²⁴ Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute (2022), [Decision making of adult learners](#)

²⁵ Department for Education (2023), [Evaluation of skills bootcamps](#)

²⁶ Local Government Association (2022), [Place based adult skills and training](#)

²⁷ Department for Education and Learning and Work Institute (2018), [Barriers to learning for disadvantaged groups](#)

²⁸ (ibid)

²⁹ Department for Education and Learning and Work Institute (2022), [National Skills Fund: Free Courses for Jobs](#)

³⁰ RSA and Ufi VocTech Trust (2022), [Rebalancing Adult Learning](#)

³¹ (ibid)

- Having a **family** can also raise other situational barriers, including increased costs, and lacking quiet space to work at home.³²
- A lack of available or reliable **transport** presents as a barrier for adults, especially for those in rural areas with poor public transport links.³³ Public transport can be particularly challenging for adult learners with disabilities or sensory conditions³⁴, and transport costs disproportionately affect vulnerable adults and those on low incomes. For example, disabled adult learners reported having extra costs associated with travel, such as having to gather funds to get transport to tube stations.³⁵

Dispositional barriers

- **Lack of confidence** can inhibit adult learning, which often results from previous negative learning experiences or difficulties that has led to a lack of belief in their own abilities and anxieties around returning to a classroom setting.³⁶
- **Lack of motivation** prevents adults from taking up learning, especially when the benefits of learning are not clear. Adult participation in learning is triggered when motivations and personal benefits outweigh the barriers, and adults need to be supported in their decision-making processes to move from precontemplation to determination.³⁷

Barriers for different groups

Adults from underserved and overlooked groups are particularly impacted by barriers to learning. Across the lifespan of the Adult Participation in Learning Survey³⁸, social grade, working status, age, and age at which respondents completed full-time education have been identified as significant predictors of participation in learning; adults are more likely to participate in learning if they are younger, from a higher socioeconomic group, already highly qualified, or in work. These inequalities have persisted for more than 25 years. The survey also found that:

- Adults who haven't taken part in learning recently are more likely to raise dispositional barriers, while those who have are more likely to raise situational barriers. This suggests that raising confidence and motivation is key for non-learners.
- Adults who left education aged 16 or under, are currently aged 55 or over, are in social grade DE,³⁹ or who are retired are also more likely to raise dispositional barriers.
- In 2022, women and younger adults were particularly likely to raise situational barriers.

³² Department for Education and Learning and Work Institute (2018), [*Barriers to learning for disadvantaged groups*](#)

³³ Department for Education and Learning and Work Institute (2021), [*Cost and outreach pilots evaluation*](#)

³⁴ Hall (2022), [*More than just education: A participatory action research project on adult education in London*](#)

³⁵ (ibid)

³⁶ Department for Education and Learning and Work Institute (2018), [*Barriers to learning for disadvantaged groups*](#)

³⁷ (ibid)

³⁸ Learning and Work Institute (1996-2022), [*Adult Participation in Learning Survey*](#)

³⁹ Social Grade D comprises the semi-skilled and unskilled working class, and is usually linked with Grade E, those in the lowest grade occupations or who are unemployed.

- Both employed and unemployed adults raised situational barriers, demonstrating how both groups can experience practical barriers to learning.

Further research has found that the most disadvantaged learners describe a cumulative effect of multiple barriers as preventing them from taking part in learning. These include people in receipt of benefits, people with disabilities and health conditions, single parents, and participants whose first language is not English.⁴⁰

In addition, age can present as a barrier for older workers, who might experience age discrimination in job applications, might not feel they are eligible for certain training programmes (including apprenticeships) and experience a lack of workplace training.⁴¹ Brader (2022)⁴² highlights that certain employment schemes might not be geared towards helping older people into employment, although the government have attempted to address this by introducing support to help upskill and retrain older workers, including the Lifetime Skills Guarantee, National Skills Fund, and Skills Bootcamps for free qualifications and courses for adults.

Digital exclusion

Lack of digital access is a key barrier to address in order to upskill and reskill the adult workforce; a survey by the RSA⁴³ found that digital access, such as to broadband and digital devices, is the number one requirement to successfully access learning. In the past few years, accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK has experienced an increase in online learning. According to the Adult Participation in Learning Survey⁴⁴, over two-thirds (68%) of learners said that at least some of their learning has been online in 2022, and 69% in 2021 – an increase from 47% in 2019. The UK has seen a significant increase in digital use, where 99% of the UK are now ‘online’ (defined by the ONS as having engaged with the internet in the last 3 months) compared to 89% in 2016.⁴⁵ However a lack of affordability, capability and digital confidence amongst both learners and training providers is still prevalent and locks some people out of learning.⁴⁶

Many learners have limited access to new tech or data on smartphones, have issues connecting to or affording internet or broadband, and have limited devices that are shared with family members. Learners from BAME groups are more likely to report problems accessing suitable devices, online platforms or services, software, Wi-Fi, mobile-data, and private and safe study spaces for online learning.⁴⁷ Employer perceptions of online learning can also create barriers to adopting technology, where some do not perceive online as ‘real’ learning, and many workplaces lack suitable technology for learners.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ Department for Education and Learning and Work Institute (2018), [Barriers to learning for disadvantaged groups](#)

⁴¹ Catch 22 (2023), [Upskilling and Reskilling older workers](#)

⁴² Brader (2022), [Older workers in the UK](#)

⁴³ RSA and Ufi VocTech Trust (2022), [Rebalancing Adult Learning](#)

⁴⁴ Learning and Work Institute (1996-2022), [Adult Participation in Learning Survey](#)

⁴⁵ Lloyds Bank (2022), [The 2022 UK Consumer Digital Index](#)

⁴⁶ Ufi VocTech Trust (2021), [Ufi VocTech Challenge 2021 Green Paper](#)

⁴⁷ Hutchings and Sheppard (2021), [Exploring the impact of digital and data poverty on BAME learners. Jisc](#)

⁴⁸ Ufi VocTech Trust (2021), [Ufi VocTech Challenge 2021 Green Paper](#)

A lack of digital skills is prevalent among adult learners, and some have complex needs that require individual support.⁴⁹ Reviews of adult learning in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales⁵⁰ found that adults often struggle to use online technology, such as installing or using Zoom. Additionally, the Lloyds 2022 UK Consumer Digital Index⁵¹ reports that one fifth (20%) of UK adults lack basic digital skills, which includes fundamental tasks such as using available controls on a device and opening a web browser page.

Some groups of learners are more likely to learn online than others; the 2022 Adult Participation in Learning Survey⁵² found that women, adults in higher social grades, and those who left education later or are educated to a higher level are most likely to learn online. Although, even among those with digital capabilities, some learners have found online learning challenging.⁵³ For example, learners noted the reduction in social opportunities, difficulties asking questions quickly, as well as difficulty interrupting others online. They also noted that online learning is less interactive and can lack structure or routine. Despite this, adults felt that online learning is flexible, accessible, and convenient, removes stress associated with travel, and is a useful place to ask tutors questions discreetly. While adults felt that Zoom was a suitable substitute for face to face provision during lockdown, it wasn't regarded as equivalent.

System-wide barriers

System-wide barriers include institutional barriers that arise from individual training providers and educational institutions, as well as wider barriers arising from the nature of the education, employment and skills system.

- The UK's **complex skills system** creates challenges for many employers, training providers, and current and prospective learners. This complexity presents challenges for learners who experience difficulties navigating information about learning opportunities and funding.⁵⁴ The wide range of choice of qualifications, frequent changes to the education and skills system, and policy churn of new initiatives can make it challenging to identify what support is out there or to decide which training routes to take. The complex system also means it can be difficult for employers to effectively engage and collaborate with training providers⁵⁵, and for training providers to deliver the skills learners need for the jobs in a local area.⁵⁶
- **Lack of appropriate and accurate adult Careers Information, Advice and Guidance (CIAG)** results in learners lacking awareness of the learning opportunities that are available to them, including routes into learning as well

⁴⁹ (ibid)

⁵⁰ Learning and Work Institute (2020-2021), *Learner experiences of learning in lockdown: Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales*

⁵¹ Lloyds Bank (2022), *The 2022 UK Consumer Digital Index*

⁵² Learning and Work Institute (1996-2022), *Adult Participation in Learning Survey*

⁵³ Learning and Work Institute (2020-2021), *Learner experiences of learning in lockdown: Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales*

⁵⁴ Department for Education and Learning and Work Institute (2018), *Barriers to learning for disadvantaged groups*

⁵⁵ Department for Education (2021), *Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth*

⁵⁶ Stephen Evans (2022), *Fit for purpose? Education and employment support for young people*

as potential outcomes and benefits of learning.⁵⁷ Adult CIAG is rarely tailored to individual needs, presenting particular challenges for those with additional needs and barriers (e.g. ESOL needs, different previous experiences of the education system).

- **Lack of flexibility** in provision (including both timetabling and course content), and **unresponsiveness** of educational institutions, can create additional barriers for adult learners.⁵⁸ Limited flexibility means there can be a lack of alignment between local employer needs and course content, meaning that technical training and qualifications aren't always delivering the skills that are needed.⁵⁹ In addition to this, funding creates too much emphasis on learner attendance as opposed to the acquisition of skills.⁶⁰
- **Employers' attitudes to training** can also create barriers for learners. For example, some employers might be unwilling to train their staff because of concerns that trained employees will be poached by competitors.⁶¹

Existing good practice with digital tools and pedagogies

This section considers existing good practice with digital tools that is helping to narrow inequalities, address barriers to participation in learning, build collaborative practice and meet employer skills needs.

Ufi has looked extensively at the nature of good practice in adult learning and skills provision, Ufi's VocTech Challenge White Paper from 2021⁶² and the 2019 evaluation⁶³ both look at good practice in some detail. This section seeks to understand some new and continuingly important themes that are worth considering again.

Meeting learner and employer needs

Learner-centred, co-designed models of innovation are most effective at meeting learner needs.⁶⁴ These designs should have accessibility and inclusivity as core considerations. This means tech solutions should have clear and accurate content, supported content (subtitles/captions with videos), consistent language, flexible access, and personal support and encouragement.⁶⁵ While highly interactive online content can increase accessibility for some, it can also act as a barrier for others

⁵⁷ Department for Education and Learning and Work Institute (2018), [Barriers to learning for disadvantaged groups](#)

⁵⁸ RSA and Ufi VocTech Trust (2022), [Rebalancing Adult Learning](#)

⁵⁹ Department for Education (2021), [Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth](#)

⁶⁰ Ufi VocTech Trust (2021), [Ufi VocTech Challenge 2021 White Paper. Levelling Up Learning: How VocTech can help address the growing digital divide](#)

⁶¹ Department of Education (2022), [Labour market and skills demand: horizon scanning and scenarios](#)

⁶² Ufi VocTech Trust (2021), [Ufi VocTech Challenge 2021 White Paper. Levelling Up Learning: How VocTech can help address the growing digital divide](#)

⁶³ Ufi VocTech Trust (2023), [Evaluating the impact of our grant funding](#)

⁶⁴ Association for Learning Technology (ALT) and Ufi VocTech Trust (2022), [Amplify FE Insights Report 2022](#)

⁶⁵ Learning and Work Institute and NESTA (2021), [What works for adult online learning: An evaluation of the CareerTech Challenge](#)

depending on individual needs. Blended and hybrid models – that is, using online and in-person formats – are effective for meeting learner needs, especially for basic skills programmes.⁶⁶

To support learners into future careers, engaging with jobseekers and careers advice specialists helps innovators understand how to make tech solutions more appealing to their target audience, and produce more engaging tools.⁶⁷ Flexible, non-linear content is desired by employers to help learners to upskill quickly and meet employer needs at the pace of the changing business world.⁶⁸ User testing can help to refine and improve usability and readiness of innovations. Other success factors include alignment with ‘real-world’ work activities, ensuring that the digital delivery method is appropriately aligned with learning content, and opportunities to accredit online learning, for example, through micro-credentials and digital badging.⁶⁹

Motivation, confidence and digital competence

Digital learning approaches can help increase motivation, persistence, digital confidence and competence in learners.⁷⁰ For example, research has found that receiving text reminders about learning encourages adults to engage more; the ASK behavioural interventions⁷¹ found that attendance rates of adult learners enrolled on maths and English courses improved by 22%, and achievement rates by 16%, after receiving weekly text messages of encouragement. Attendance and achievement also increased from texting friends and family about learners’ progress.

Bite-size learning with rewards that are relevant to learners’ work, instant feedback, apps, interactive visuals, varied media content, and gamification can increase motivation while developing learner competency.⁷² This is particularly beneficial for learners who find using pen and paper uninspiring as it reminds them of negative school experiences.

It is also important that learners are supported to build digital identities by identifying clear purposes for different digital activities.⁷³ This includes managing personal and professional digital personas to develop professional networks, skills, and continued understanding of how building digital fluency can support work progression.

Digital interventions can be effective where they are personalised. This could include helping learners to self-identify their key strengths and weaknesses, such as using software which provides instant assessments.

⁶⁶ Learning and Work Institute (2019), [Evidence review: What works to improve adult basic skills?](#)

⁶⁷ Learning and Work Institute and NESTA (2021), [Using Labour Market Data to Support Adults to Plan for their Future Career: Experience from the CareerTech Challenge](#)

⁶⁸ Ufi VocTech Trust (2021), [Ufi VocTech Challenge 2021 Green Paper](#)

⁶⁹ CIPD (2021), [Digital learning in a post-COVID-19 economy: a literature review](#)

⁷⁰ Association for Learning Technology (ALT) and Ufi VocTech Trust (2022), [Amplify FE Insights Report 2022](#); Ufi VocTech Trust (2021), [Ufi VocTech Challenge 2021 Green Paper](#)

⁷¹ Department for Education (2018), [Improving engagement and attainment in maths and English courses: Insights from behavioural research](#)

⁷² Learning and Work Institute and NESTA (2021), [What works for adult online learning: An evaluation of the CareerTech Challenge](#); Learning and Work Institute (2019), [Evidence review: What works to improve adult basic skills?](#)

⁷³ Association for Learning Technology (ALT) and Ufi VocTech Trust (2022), [Amplify FE Insights Report 2022](#)

However, while personalisation and digital identity is important, so is collaborative online learning; those who are comfortable engaging with peers also benefit from peer learning, through sharing ideas and inspiring each other. As identified by Ufi⁷⁴, learners currently excluded from peer group engagement have less positive learning experiences. The CareerTech Challenge evaluation⁷⁵ reported a successful intervention using a community forum that enabled learner discussions between like-minded people, as well as a digital skills bootcamp that enabled collaborative online learning using online tools to complete tasks.

The role of the tutor is important for online learning, for example trusted messengers such as tutors are beneficial in signposting learners towards online interventions. Additionally, integrating technology into existing pedagogy, as opposed to imposing technology on tutors, helps to empower educators and better demonstrate its value.⁷⁶

Digital knowledge-sharing: sectors, providers, practitioners

An audit of nearly 100 Communities of Practice (CoPs), set up by sector bodies, technology companies, individuals or groups of practitioners, revealed several examples of good practice for knowledge-sharing:⁷⁷

- **Open platforms** host the most influential network activity, as they facilitate wider knowledge-sharing between professionals, are easier to observe, discover and learn from, and are more easily accessed by newcomers.
- Supporting a broad range of discussions attracts a larger community base. **Appropriate tagging** such as using a Twitter chat hashtag can encourage meaningful conversations within the community.
- **Giving CoP members meaningful control** over their domains and communities creates sustainable engagement as opposed to one-way communications from providers to sector bodies.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Ufi VocTech Trust (2021), [Ufi VocTech Challenge 2021 Green Paper](#)

⁷⁵ Learning and Work Institute and NESTA (2021), [What works for adult online learning: An evaluation of the CareerTech Challenge](#); Learning and Work Institute (2019), [Evidence review: What works to improve adult basic skills?](#)

⁷⁶ Association for Learning Technology (ALT) and Ufi VocTech Trust (2022), [Amplify FE Insights Report 2022](#)

⁷⁷ Association for Learning Technology (ALT) and Ufi VocTech Trust (2020), [Communities of Practice Sector Audit Report](#)

⁷⁸ Association for Learning Technology (ALT) and Ufi VocTech Trust (2022), [Amplify FE Insights Report 2022](#)



Ufi VocTech Trust
First Floor, 10 Queen Street Place
London EC4R 1BE

info@ufi.co.uk
ufi.co.uk



Learning and Work Institute
3rd Floor, 89 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7TP

enquiries@learningandwork.org.uk
learningandwork.org.uk

Version 1.1