ufi VocTech
CHALLENGE

2021 **White Paper**

Levelling Up Learning

How VocTech can help address
the growing digital divide

ufi.co.uk

Contents

Foreword

I firmly believe that digital technology has a key role to play in helping reduce the impact of the pandemic by creating opportunities for those most at risk of being excluded from vocational training to gain the skills they need for work. Therefore, it is an enormous pleasure to launch the 2021 VocTech Challenge White Paper which sets out the role that Ufi, with partners, will play to help level up access to vocational learning in the UK.

Whilst we have seen a huge increase in the awareness of VocTech and technology in education more broadly, it has also exposed the widening divide between those with access to opportunity and those who are in danger of being left behind.

We want to ensure that a future learning system includes the best that tech has to offer, ensuring that technology is utilised to increase equity of opportunity and improve the lives of many.

This White Paper looks to the future of learning and work and ways in which technology can be developed and deployed to support learners in the medium to long term. It is important that tech is not seen purely as remote or online learning, but as a tool that can enhance learning, teaching, and training, whether that is in the classroom, as part of a hybrid model or self-directed.

We need to recognise the importance of the debates around access and devices and think what this means for learners. How do we design ways of learning that address poor connectivity, older devices, and data poverty? How do we support the development and integration of tech in the classroom and workplace that supports better inclusion, confidence building and motivation?

We are hopeful about the tech enabled future of learning and this White Paper sets out the role that Ufi can play, as well as our asks of partners, in ensuring a better, fairer future. A future that is possible through VocTech.

On behalf of all the Ufi Trustees we are tremendously grateful for all the time that people have given to this work so far – and I hope that you will stay with us now as we take forward actions from this collective thinking.

Dominic Gill
Chair of Trustees, Ufi VocTech Trust
MD Intequal etc.

Synopsis

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.

This White Paper sets out our commitment to unlock the potential of digital technology to level up opportunities for those most impacted by the digital divide to get the skills they need for work.

In 2020, COVID-19 exposed fault-lines of inequality that need to be addressed, with many more people now at risk from being excluded from education and training and being able to access employment. These are issues that pre-date the COVID-19 pandemic but have been further compounded by it.

In response, using design thinking principles, Ufi engaged in 3 months of dialogue and discovery, to explore how VocTech – digital technology to support vocational learning - could tackle some of the issues faced by learners most impacted by the digital divide.

The insights from our work, set out in the VocTech Challenge Green Paper were concentrated into five themes which have helped us to understand how Ufi, in collaboration with our wider community could use our collective resources to have more impact for those less well served by mainstream provision.

What does this White Paper represent?

This White Paper sets out the actions that Ufi can take, both on our own and in partnership, to help tackle some of the critical challenges arising from the Green Paper and accompanying consultation. The process identified key areas related to our core mission to support the development, deployment, and adoption of VocTech that is designed for adult vocational learners, where Ufi could have an impact.

These areas are the focus of our 2021 VocTech Challenge – which aims to catalyse change in the adoption and deployment of technology to level up vocational learning for those most at risk of falling behind.

PROBLEM DEFINITION
Technology

PROBLEM DEFINITION
Learner confidence

PROBLEM DEFINITION
Digital skills

PROBLEM DEFINITION
Social and practical learning

PROBLEM DEFINITION
The VocTech market

Technology is a critical issue for those most at risk from being excluded from training – there is a significant equality gap that threatens the chances of 'levelling up'.

Confidence to engage with learning has dropped and this has been compounded by a lack of motivation.

There is generally a lower level of digital competence in learner groups most likely to be negatively impacted by the pandemic which blocks access to and engagement with many learning opportunities.

Personalised learning too often gears towards individual effort, without regard for a learner community and culture or social learning factors.

Funding is based on time and attendance rather than acquisition of skills and a lack of support for the sector to manage innovation.

This White Paper sets out our commitment to use our grant funding and to work with partners and employers to unlock the potential of digital technology to improve opportunities for those most impacted by the digital divide to get the skills they need for work. We will:

1	2	3
Run a targeted grant call on how VocTech can solve issues around confidence to create a step-change in learner confidence and motivation, leading to better outcomes for the learner, for the employer and for society as a whole.	Work in partnership to commission pilot projects and research to support innovation and investment in the most under-served communities of learners and encourage the adoption of 'what works' through demonstration and showcasing.	Advocate for change and support other organisations to tackle some of the underpinning wider societal challenges.

The consultation process raised several critical societal issues that impact people's ability to learn, including access to tech (both connectivity and devices) and data. Whilst these are not covered by the remit of Ufi, it is important that we continue to support partners in addressing these and consider ways in which their impact can be mitigated as we develop our targeted strategy.

> **"This White Paper considers those actions that we can take as an organisation and those we can develop together with partners to help improve opportunities for those most impacted by the digital divide. The figures are stark and the differential impact of the pandemic across the UK has the potential to become a long term and severe problem if we do not recognise the problem and work quickly to mitigate it. Ufi has a really clear role to play in supporting technology that can benefit the hardest hit. This White Paper sets out the ways in which we will work over the next 12 months to best align our funding and resources to focus on preventing the skills and life chances catastrophe that is threatening so many.**
>
> **There remains a wider context of socio-economic issues that we cannot tackle ourselves but are fundamental to the long-term success of our mission - in this latter area, we offer our relentlessly practical approach to demonstrating what 'good' looks like, so that policy makers and those with wider responsibilities can use our community and our thinking to help to shape future actions themselves."**

Rebecca Garrod-Waters
CEO, Ufi VocTech Trust

Have your say

We are interested in your views on the approach laid out in this White Paper and welcome comments and engagement. We will be keeping our consultation process open until Friday 21st May 2021 and we look forward to hearing from you.

Click here to respond on our website

ufi.co.uk/challenge/white-paper/feedback

"The future cannot simply be business as usual. It's not just about making virtual learning environments and learning the pedagogies. It's learning how to make things accessible and inclusive, making sure vocational education works for everybody."

Sally Betts, Ideas4Learning Ltd

1. Introduction

Since the start of 2021, Ufi has been engaged in a process of design thinking to define, in collaboration with our wider community, the critical challenge for VocTech in 2021. Where should we focus our efforts and resources?

In an exercise of discovery and co-creation across our VocTech Community we set about to explore the question:

> **How can VocTech – technology to support adult vocational skills - improve outcomes for people most impacted by the digital divide and at greatest risk from the long-term impact of the pandemic on access to training and jobs?**

It has been an enlightening process, stepping into the lived experiences of learners, trainers, developers, and employers, during one of the most disrupted periods for education in a generation.

What we have tried to do is to look beyond the immediate effects of the pandemic to see the shape of adult vocational education in the future and the critical issues that will be impacting learners, educators, and employers. This is not about dealing with the immediate challenges of the pandemic, but a robust, tech-enabled recovery plan. It is still perhaps too early to know exactly what will endure from our 2020 experiences, but the process of consultation that we have undertaken has helped us to 'triangulate' from several perspectives where some of the key pain points are in the sector.

Our discovery phase confirmed that those with limited access to education and training before 2020 are now even less likely to have access to the quality learning and support that they need to develop their skills. And there is a strong likelihood that without positive intervention, 'hard to reach' learners will remain excluded, with focus remaining on easier-to-serve communities.

On the positive side, there have been some impressive transformations within businesses and training providers that really demonstrate what 'good' looks like in digitally supported learning. We aim to build on these positives and help to ensure that those gains that have been made are maintained for the future. Collectively, we need to offer alternatives to those who have had limited experiences of VocTech and show that there are better ways to deploy it to offer better, more accessible learning.

2. The role of Ufi VocTech Trust

Ufi vision

To create a world where vocational skills are celebrated and valued by all as the engine upon which the UK economy is built and where the development of those skills is made possible by the best technology solutions, providing easier access, greater opportunity and better outcomes for all.

There are four fundamental pillars that underpin our Theory of Change – the levers that we can pull to create lasting behavioural and cultural shifts that create a better future for all.

Our strong, independent voice and flexible funding mean that we can bring expertise, insight, and resources to tackle the challenges we have identified. We do this by applying the core principles of our strategy, Learning Without Walls: Beyond 2020 to everything we do:

- We champion the power of technology to improve skills for work and deliver better outcomes for all.

- We act as a funding partner and essential friend to innovators in skills development, looking to help people progress in the workplace.

- We catalyse a fundamental shift in how individuals, employers, and UK society view, embrace and benefit from vocational skills development through digital innovation.

This White Paper considers those actions that we can take as an organisation and those we can develop together with partners. As you would expect from Ufi, our approach to the Green and White papers has not been as an academic exercise, but as a practical mechanism to address what are very wide-reaching societal issues. Having looked across the whole landscape, it is now time for us to bring our focus back to what is ours to do.

Whilst it is tempting to step into trying to 'fix' some of the wider issues that our discovery phase has highlighted, it is important that we focus on our core mission. This means that everything we fund or advocate for must be focussed on:
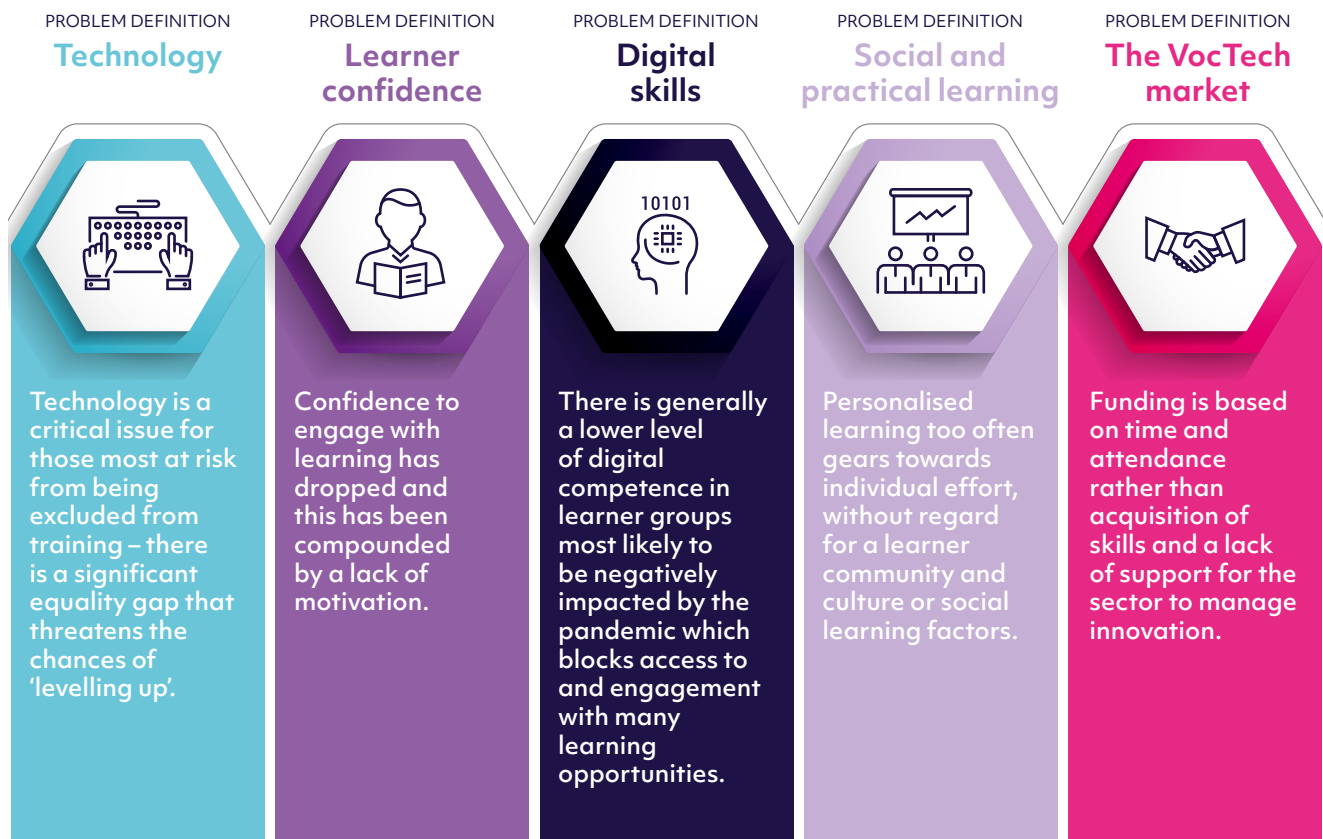
- Adult learners (from age 16 right through to retirement).

- Vocational skills – the skills a person needs for work, whatever they may be.

- Tech for Good – where technology can have a significant positive impact on learner outcomes and for society as a whole.

- Those sectors, geographies and communities that are under-served or left behind from mainstream provision.

From all the responses and ideas, we have created our VocTech Challenge for 2021 as well as adding to our planning process ideas that need further exploration for medium and longer term implementation.

3. Findings from the Green Paper

The insights from our work were concentrated into five groups, explored in detail within the Green Paper.

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Technology is a critical issue for those most at risk from being excluded from training – there is a significant equality gap that threatens the chances of 'levelling up'.

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Confidence to engage with learning has dropped and this has been compounded by a lack of motivation.

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There is generally a lower level of digital competence in learner groups most likely to be negatively impacted by the pandemic which blocks access to and engagement with many learning opportunities.

PROBLEM DEFINITION
Social and practical learning

Personalised learning too often gears towards individual effort, without regard for a learner community and culture or social learning factors.

PROBLEM DEFINITION
The VocTech market

Funding is based on time and attendance rather than acquisition of skills and a lack of support for the sector to manage innovation.

Early results from Jisc's ongoing FE Learner Digital Experience Insights Survey 2021 show a higher proportion of BAME than white respondents have had problems with access to suitable devices, online platforms or services, software, Wi-Fi, mobile data costs and private and safe study space.

[Exploring the impact of digital and data poverty on BAME learners, Charles Hutchings and Marianne Sheppard, Jisc insight team, Jisc, February 2021](#)

We are grateful to all of those that took time to engage in our consultation process and we value the insight and detail you have brought to the process.

The discovery process was open, exploring the wide societal context of learner experiences and as such many of the aspects that emerged were beyond the scope of Ufi to address. But we are keenly aware that these remain fundamental enablers for people to be able to benefit from the value of VocTech, so we offer our support to those tackling the challenges directly. The key issues to highlight were:

i) Digital skills

It continues to be disappointing to see the extent to which digital skills remain a barrier to accessing many online services, learning included – and we saw this across both the learner and educator communities. We know that digital skills, alongside literacy and numeracy, are the set of critical skills needed for work. Whilst Ufi do not have a remit to support the upskilling of the UK in basic digital skills, we have always recognised their importance and we will work with partners to develop technology solutions that contribute to the development of digital skills for work.

> **Ufi Case Study – VocTech to support the development of digital skills – at scale.**
>
> **[iDEA](#) – Inspiring Digital Enterprise Award helps people develop and demonstrate digital and employability skills for free. Short interactive online modules and digital badges have been designed to build learner confidence, engagement, and motivation.**

ii) Devices and connectivity

While individuals remain disconnected from digital learning resources, their ability to upskill for the future remains limited. Ufi is not a funder of equipment or bandwidth but we can act as an 'expert user' to explain the need. We have seen many excellent initiatives to try to address these issues and look forward to adding our voice alongside those campaigning for solutions to these challenges.

iii) VocTech Market

Breaking into the marketplace with new VocTech ideas remains difficult. There are many business support programmes available and it is not in Ufi's mission to add to those. But we will add our expertise and support, particularly via our understanding of the market through our Ventures work, to champion innovation and support our projects to achieve scale.

4. Ufi VocTech Challenge 2021

"Just as the impact of the COVID-19 crisis has been unequally spread between generations, its been unequally spread within them, too."

K Henehan, Uneven steps: Changes in youth unemployment and study since the onset of COVID-19, Resolution Foundation, April 2021

THE CHALLENGE:

Levelling up learning

How VocTech can help address the growing digital divide.

Using our tool kit of funding, insights and advocacy we aim to support the development of VocTech solutions with a focus on improving outcomes for those most impacted by the digital divide and encourage the adoption and deployment of 'what works' through demonstration and advocacy.

We will approach this in 3 ways:

- Run a targeted grant call on how VocTech can solve issues around confidence to create a step-change in learner confidence and motivation leading to better outcomes for the learner, for the employer and for society as a whole.

- Work in partnership to:

  - commission pilot projects and research to support innovation and investment in the most under-served communities of learners to help reduce the digital divide.

  - encourage the adoption and deployment of 'what works' through showcasing and demonstration.

- Advocate for change and support other organisations to tackle some of the underpinning wider societal challenges.

4.1 VocTech Challenge 2021 - Grant Call

This grant call will focus on improving access to skills and employment for learners where there is a strong likelihood that, without positive intervention, they will remain excluded or are at significant risk of being 'left behind'. We are interested in those groups that are currently least likely to engage with learning to understand the drivers and barriers that they face. Particular risk factors for digital and economic exclusion include low skill levels, low-wage employment or unemployment, remote geography, industry sector restructuring, and workers in the gig economy.

ufi VocTech SEED	**VocTech Seed – Grants of between £15k – £50k to test early stage ideas.**
ufi VocTech IMPACT	**VocTech Impact – Grants of between £100k – £150k for VocTech solutions which can deliver benefit to a large number of learners.**

We will offer a mixture of VocTech Seed and VocTech Impact type grants to support the funding of projects that ultimately build the confidence and ability of people most impacted by the digital divide to be more active and independent learners. We will publish a full scope and criteria for the funding call in the summer.

> **This grant call is not about a subtle improvement in offer, it is about creating a step-change in improving confidence and motivation so that increased learner confidence leads to better outcomes for the learner, for the employer and for society as a whole. And to achieve this we expect projects to bring together learners and employers alongside the development team.**

We will be looking for projects that utilise technology in ways that support learner confidence. There are a number of current and emerging technologies that could be developed or deployed to improve accessibility, create a supportive learning environment, offer increased personalisation and motivation to start or keep on learning. User-centred approaches to learning design will be important. We will prioritise projects that are committed to our design thinking approach in being open to the real lived experiences of users – our view is that designing well for learners with additional needs improves the universal offer.

Ideas may also be supported that address the confidence of teachers / trainers in deploying VocTech in order to ensure the learner journey is the best possible.

> **Ufi Case Study: VocTech to overcome motivational barriers to learn.**
>
> **Readable is an app that helps adults learn workplace and general English through short-form texts stories, but these stories are stories with a difference, written to entertain as well as teach. Watch a video to find out more.**

We are encouraging applications from:

- Collaborative groups of organisations and employers where at least one partner has a strong track-record in working with the target community of learners and at least one has a strong tech or learning design background.

- Individual organisations with a strong track-record in working with the community of learners and have a clear understanding of how to commission the tech they may need and/or tech developers that have a partner already in place that has that position of trust in the community.

The key criterion is the ability of the applicant(s) to work closely with a defined community of learners who are most at risk of digital disadvantage. This is not a call for speculative technologies developed in isolation of the user group. The users will define the need, be part of the solution development and be the natural first test group for the ideas generated.

As with all our funding calls, projects selected will also have to demonstrate how:

- They ultimately have the capacity to scale up to deliver to a significant number of learners.

- They are open to and using best practice in the area that they are exploring.

- They are aware of what is currently in the market for this learner group or technology solution and are proposing something which represents a significant improvement to what is already available.

"The more training and skills you have the more likely you are to have access to the opportunity to train further."

Learning through lockdown: Findings from the 2020 Adult Participation in Learning Survey Fiona Aldridge, Emily Jones and David Southgate, Learning & Work Institute, November 2020

4.2 Working in Partnership

4.2.1 Commissioned Pilots

We said at the outset of the Challenge process that we would bring more than just our grant programmes to bear on the issues that we discovered. We believe that working in partnership to support innovation and investment in VocTech in the most under-served parts of the UK is the most effective way to move some of these issues into positive change by piloting new approaches and diving deeper into some of the insights that we uncovered. We will utilise our full strategy toolkit - funding, expertise and advocacy - to build confidence in all parts of the vocational learning sector to develop and deploy VocTech solutions.

Place-based collaboration

Develop a place-based pilot to bring together community learning where VocTech can offer a route into developing vocational skills within a supportive and local framework.

There is more to do to understand how the full potential of how VocTech can support collective local action to improve learning outcomes and ultimately application of those skills in employment. We will explore how place-based technology solutions may be a way forward for those most impacted by the digital divide.

Co-Designed Pilots

Support a number of projects, with organisations aligned to Ufi's mission, to explore how VocTech can improve learner outcomes for the hardest to reach communities.

We will work to catalyse change by inviting partners to work alongside us to use design thinking principles in developing new approaches to some of the issues identified in the Green Paper where we believe we can, together, make the biggest difference to the development and large-scale adoption of VocTech. The precise detail of what we will do will emerge from discussions with our chosen partners but will include shared advocacy and community development as well as potentially piloting some demonstrator project ideas.

VocTech Champions

In all our discussions, the value of role models came through as a strong indicator for success. This was true about individuals, projects and organisations. We will develop a programme to identify and fund a small number of VocTech champions to draw on learnings from our 'pilot' projects to drive change within the sector. At this stage this is an idea in embryonic form, and we welcome engagement on how this might be taken forward. We will look closely at issues of equality, diversity and inclusion in taking this forward, so that we represent as fully as we can the full breadth of the communities we serve.

> **Ufi Case Study – VocTech to overcome barriers to progression.**
>
> **THRIVE is a Career Matters digital platform. It offers a personal development programme and careers service to support care leavers and those with lived care experience. Engaging, interactive, and with strong employer engagement THRIVE prepares learners for the world of work and provides inspirational opportunities.**

Commissioned Reports

Ufi has up to now not supported 'research' projects, preferring to develop actions that demonstrate what can be done to drive change. But the discovery phase has highlighted that as we progressively reduce barriers through our collective actions, there remain challenges for the most disadvantaged that are still not being addressed. So, in addition to the pilots we will take forward now, we will also take a longer view on what we might do next.

We will commission a community research project that looks specifically at the challenges facing those most impacted by the digital divide and how VocTech could potentially be deployed to address some of those challenges. The intended outcome is not an academic paper on the socio-economic conditions of these learners, but an actionable report that can influence future Ufi strategy and delivery. We remain focused on the practical goal of creating change in the short to medium term.

4.2.2 Showcasing & Demonstration of 'What Works'

We will continue to champion the adoption of the very best of VocTech by working with partners to encourage the deployment of 'what works' through showcasing and demonstration and we will use this to inform and inspire thinking about the future of adult vocational education. We intend to take a more active role in drawing on the experience and impact of the work we have funded and the organisations we have worked with.

We will do more to share the work already being done by Ufi and partners in the VocTech community, sharing practical insights that others can draw upon. This White Paper is a starting point for that sharing.

Ufi Case Study – VocTech designed to build learner confidence.

Stardash Studios is a free smartphone game for young adults, helping them to see everyday maths in vocational settings. Developed with education experts and award winning game developers with input from young adults, learners grow in confidence by completing missions, collecting coins and charting their skills on a CV.

4.3 Advocate for Change

The Green Paper has shown us some specific areas of advocacy that we will throw our resources behind to help drive change across the sector. We will:

• Champion the importance of quality resources and continuous professional development (CPD) vocational training professions to equip them with the skills and confidence they need to adopt VocTech in their practice.

• Encourage more imaginative uses of technology in assessment to support motivation and engagement of learners.

• Promote the importance of user-centered design and digital pedagogies in the development and deployment of VocTech.

• Continue to take appropriate risks with our own grant funding to encourage innovation in vocational education.

5. The future

Our wide-ranging discussions with FE providers, innovators within FE Colleges, technology specialists and independent private sector developers uncovered some challenges for the sector in how innovative VocTech can be brought through to market and scaled. There are examples of good practice already in the sector. In line with our design thinking process, we want to explore with partners what we can do to support the FE sector to be able to do more with the great VocTech ideas and innovations they develop.

We will also explore how Ufi can work to further strengthen the employer voice in our future programmes. It is crucial to our strategy that a skill gained is a skill used, so linking learning to employment is a big part of success in our book.

These are areas for further development and we believe that they should form part of our wider strategy so, rather than rush to a response for this year's Challenge, we intend to develop our thinking and will set out our plans in our Delivery Plan for 2022.

6. Next steps

We have always been focussed on supporting activity that solves problems, not just identifies them, so we will be progressing the actions contained within this paper immediately.

1	2	3
Run a targeted grant call on how VocTech can solve issues around confidence to create a step-change in learner confidence and motivation, leading to better outcomes for the learner, for the employer and for society as a whole.	Work in partnership to commission pilot projects and research to support innovation and investment in the most under-served communities of learners and encourage the adoption of 'what works' through demonstration and showcasing.	Advocate for change and support other organisations to tackle some of the underpinning wider societal challenges.

Have your say

We invite our wider community to consider this white paper and contribute to comments during the consultation period which closes on Friday 21 May 2021. We look forward to hearing from you.

Click here to respond on our website

ufi.co.uk/challenge/white-paper/feedback

Appendix 1

Appendix 1 – Acknowledgements

Our thanks and gratitude go to the Ufi team of staff and freelancers for enthusiastically testing out some new ways of working and experimenting with design led thinking and to everyone who has contributed by sharing their thoughts and feedback - you know who you are.

In particular we'd like to thank the following organisations for their input.

3SpiritUK	Learning and Work Institute
Action for People CIC	NESTA
Association for Learning Technology (ALT)	NHS Health and Education
Association of Colleges	Pembrokeshire College
BAM Construct UK	PHX Training
Blackpool Transport	Playlingo
Blueflame Digital Ltd	QA
City of Glasgow College	RSA (The royal society for the encouragement of arts, manufactures and commerce)
Cleverclogs Multimedia LTD	
DAU Draexlmaier Automotive UK Ltd	Sara Dunn Associates Ltd
Edufuturists	Sempai
First Step Trust	Shelter Scotland
Halfords Autocentres	Skillbright Labs
HOLEX	Social Tech Trust
Honest Burgers Ltd	The Edge Foundation
Ideas4Learning Ltd	The Learning Foundation
Jisc	Tyton Partners
Juvo Solutions	Upskill People Ltd

Thanks to our partners, projects and The Centre for Ageing Better for the images used in this publication.

Appendix 2

Appendix 2 – References & evidence that we've drawn from

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Bridging the communication gap between Generation Y and the Baby Boomer generation

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Colleges Commission 2020

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