

# Annual Review of 2021

Championing the power of vocational  
technology to improve skills for work





## Dominic Gill

Chair of Trustees

2021 was a year of significant evolution for Ufi. The huge public uptake of learning technologies, as a result of remote working and learning, accelerated progress towards our mission:



**To support the development of digital technologies that help us all obtain the vocational skills we need to get more out of our working lives”**

Our 2021 VocTech Challenge initiative - to address regional, digital and personal barriers to upskilling – moved through insightful discovery conversations with one hundred partners into actionable grant-funded projects that demonstrate the impact of our mission. Alongside this work, our Ufi Ventures team identified new areas where our funding and support can make a real difference in the maturing VocTech market. And we have strengthened our public affairs work to engage more actively with policy makers. In addition, our strategic partnerships have gone from strength to strength, focused on areas of common ground and where our shared resources can catalyse systemic change through thought-leadership and advocacy.

We are proud to be using our growing reputation and reach to convene important conversations on where the future of VocTech might go. Our work to produce the VocTech Challenge Green and White papers involved us in some fascinating conversations with thought leaders in the sector, employers and learners. The projects we are now supporting will lead to a much deeper understanding of how tech can help create a step-change in learner confidence and motivation. And our annual Week of VocTech event helped shine a light on so much of this work: showcasing innovation and impact across assessment, reducing the digital divide and navigating the future of work.

On behalf of all of the Trustees I would like to thank the Ufi team for their hard work and dedication in ensuring we use our resources to very best effect; to catalyse change and maximise our impact. As a Board of Trustees, we asked the team to focus clearly on the economic impact of our work – building on our evidence of what works. Our mission has a social heart but very clear economic goals to improve the skills base of the UK and improve productivity.

At the time of writing, Multiverse – a company dedicated to vocational learning technology through professional apprenticeships, and a previous Ufi grant recipient – has become the UK's first Unicorn status edtech, valued at over £1bn. VocTech is adding value to learners, employers, and the economy at every level, and we are delighted to continue our mission to support this work.

With so much global transformation during the previous year, it was important in 2021 to focus on finding examples of learning that we could use to show what 'great' looks like in digital learning and access to skills and employment. The world has adapted quickly, however. Some of the solutions proved to be short-term fixes not long-term answers. Ufi remains focused on supporting lasting and sustainable change; finding ways for innovators to develop their ideas to the point where they can achieve real impact and create real change; and working alongside organisations that share our mission and passion for VocTech.

I hope you will enjoy reading some of our insights from the year and bring your ideas to us to continue the conversation.



## Rebecca Garrod-Waters

Chief Executive

I am delighted that this, our second Annual Review, celebrates all that we have achieved this year and also points towards a very positive future where the results of our actions will continue to resonate and amplify as our community grows.

We have been reflecting on the incredibly rapid changes of 2020 and have taken the opportunity to learn from our projects, investments, partners, and wider contacts to see how we can best focus our resources to continue to make positive and long-term change. In a rapidly changing world we remain totally focused on the best use of tech to support people into and at work through access to learning and skills.

We have always been focused on 'demonstration through doing' and ensuring that the work we support has a positive impact on learners. For Ufi Ventures, that meant continuing our support for the great companies in our portfolio and building out our pipeline of new investments. We thought about the ways we could add most value to our grant supported work and added a funded exploratory period to our VocTech Challenge grant fund to help ensure the problems being addressed were really well understood and had strong user input.

And while we continue to support ideas and approaches in their earliest stages (we welcomed 15 new VocTech Seed grant-funded projects to our portfolio) we retain our practical approach that their ambition must be to make lasting change. This has given us a strong foundation for refreshing our Theory of Change and developing our strategy beyond 2025.

2021 was a year of big successes. Amongst the projects and Ufi Ventures we have supported, iDEA now has over a million users, over 110,000 young people have enrolled in Springpod's virtual work experience programme (with 90% of those completing it reporting they are confident in getting a job) and over a million users are now finding work through the SonicJobs platform.

And we celebrated a number of prestigious awards this year for our projects, including a bronze, silver and gold at the Learning Technology Awards, with nine of our projects on the shortlist. We're always proud of our Ufi family and it's great when we get wider recognition of the positive impact of our work.

I hope this review will encourage you to find out more about our work, the organisations we have supported, and to be excited for the future of vocational technology and the growing positive impact it has on the lives of individuals.

# Our Strategy

Over the following pages we share some of the highlights from the year, grouped around the four pillars of the Ufi Strategy - the levers we can pull to create lasting behavioural and cultural shifts that create a better future for all.

We've included stories and links for further information about some of the organisations we have worked with.

## Document key

 = Click to explore

 = Click to watch

 = Click to listen



# 2021 in facts and figures

**7** Early-stage companies in Ufi Ventures portfolio



**1,000,000+** learners impacted in the last 12 months



**36** New VocTech innovations funded

**£12** million of co-investment in Ufi Ventures



**55** organisations supported



**£2.9** million grants awarded



**£1.55m**

new and follow-on Ufi Ventures investments



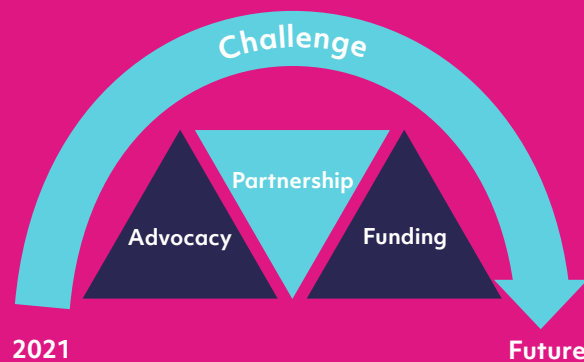
# Making change now

## The evolution of our VocTech Challenge work

We launched our 'challenge' grant funding in 2017, with a focus on manufacturing, and developed it again in 2019, looking at the changing nature of work.

In 2021 we refined this approach further, with a focus on levelling up vocational learning for those most impacted by the digital divide.

By aligning the tools in our strategy; funding, partnerships and advocacy, we aimed to use our combined knowledge and reach to be catalysts for change.



## The VocTech Challenge: Using digital approaches to support the changing nature of work

We completed this Challenge in 2021, having made grant offers of £1.15m to 10 projects to answer the question: "How can we use digital approaches to support innovation in adult vocational skills provision which directly tackle the challenges resulting from the changing nature of work?"

The projects, some of which are introduced overleaf, demonstrated the value and benefits of VocTech in improving access to learning, routes to employment and progress at work in industries facing change.



**Ufi as a funder was supportive, responsive, and agile throughout our development journey. They recognised and understood the delays we experienced while remote working and provided encouragement and support when we needed it most. They genuinely take an active interest in the projects they support."**

**Paul Fagan**  
Head of Enterprise and Employability,  
West College Scotland



## Reskilling for the future

**PROBLEM:** Engineers need more opportunities to develop the skills and innovation mindset needed to thrive in an environment of exponential technological growth and change.

**SOLUTION:** West College Scotland has developed a new approach to work-based learning for small and medium manufacturing and engineering enterprises in Scotland. The Critical Engineer is an online resource that helps learners develop the 12 'metaskills' that underpin an innovative mindset (curiosity, critical thinking, adaptation, for example).

**IMPACT:** The project has helped West College Scotland play a more meaningful, understood role in supporting a Scottish and UK response to Manufacturing 4.0. Before this, the college's technical infrastructure and capability limited their opportunity to engage with high-value advanced manufacturing and engineering (including national collaboration projects, such as NMIS). Now, they are part of a conversation at the vanguard of developing practical solutions to emerging industrial policy and thinking.



## Pathways into the workplace

**PROBLEM:** People with learning disabilities are at risk of being excluded from work opportunities due to the increasing reliance on digital skills

**SOLUTION:** The Aspire Online Platform from Digital Unite has shown how access to resources and support through an online platform, combined with peer support from a 'Champion' can help people with learning disabilities to build the essential digital skills they need for life and work. It is designed for people with learning disabilities and for the organisations that support and employ them.

**IMPACT:** To date the Aspire training and support has been used by over 300 champions across the UK, with over 2,000 views of Aspire EasyRead guides, 751 course completions, 97% of those attending recommending the training, and 83% of those saying it has improved their confidence and knowledge.



## Upskilling in logistics

**PROBLEM:** Skills shortages coupled with the need to adapt to automation has created demand for new forms of training in the logistics sector. How can tech support a workforce, who often enter the industry with low basic skills, to get the skills the industry needs to remain competitive?

**SOLUTION:** FLOW, the online talent growth platform from Skills for Logistics, provides new opportunities for skills acquisition and progression for workers. Learners, employers and training providers worked collaboratively to develop engaging micro qualifications and learning tools for employees; covering information on how to plan for progression into job roles; access to the training to get the skills; networking tools; and a work relevant search engine.

**IMPACT:** Ufi support helped Skills for Logistics to prove the platform works and to scale delivery. So far 100,000 people in the logistics sector have improved their skills through FLOW with partnerships developing with the Department for Transport and the UK's largest driver recruitment agency.



## The VocTech Challenge: Levelling up vocational learning for those most impacted by the digital divide

This was a major initiative for Ufi, engaging over 100 partners in an exercise of co-creation to answer the question: **“How VocTech can help break down barriers to learning for those most impacted by the digital divide and at greatest risk from the long-term impact of the pandemic on access to training and jobs?”**

Our Green Paper highlighted the multi-faceted challenges faced by those furthest from learning and work. It became very clear that this Challenge was going to need a strategic response that reached out beyond Ufi’s own mission and involved other key organisations across the vocational education sector.

This response was captured in our White Paper – to use our advocacy to campaign for change, develop stronger strategic partnerships with organisations aligned with our thinking and target our funding to demonstrate what works.



## VocTech Challenge grant fund

What was interesting from this work was that although technology was seen as one of the many causes of the learning divide, it was also found to have the potential to be one of the most effective parts of the solution. By overcoming barriers to confidence and belief which too often prevent adults engaging with lifelong learning, digital tools and opportunities could be empowering.

This theme of ‘confidence’ became the focus of our VocTech Challenge Grant Call, and in 2021 we made commitments to 14 projects working in sectors as diverse as healthcare and motor vehicle maintenance, spread right across the UK and using solutions from high-tech AI to lower-tech blended learning using hands-on technical equipment.



**NIACRO and its partner organisations, Sentireal PLC and Construction Industry Training Board NI, are very grateful for our grant which enabled us to get our vision off the ground. The value of the meaningful connections and engagements that our Project Account Manager facilitated along the way helped us to build a relationship with a funder – which doesn’t often happen.”**

**Ruth Walker**

Quality Assurance Manager, NIACRO



## Working in partnership

Our Challenge White Paper also highlighted the need to strengthen our partnership work, and we have now developed several workstreams in collaboration with our Strategic Partners, including:

- A piece of joint, national research with the RSA to better understand the barriers people face when engaging with learning.
- Surfacing lessons and insights into how place-based digital solutions can be deployed to improve access, motivation and retention for learners most impacted by the digital divide with RSA and iDEA.
- Investing in the future of the vocational educational profession by supporting those championing CPD and networking in the sector through our work with ALT, the Association for Learning Technology.

At the end of this Challenge, our aim is to publish a ground-breaking piece of action research, led by ALT to evidence theory and good practice on how to develop and deploy learning technology to best support adults impacted by the digital divide and furthest away from learning.



**Working with Ufi has been a real pleasure. With the patience, support and critical friendship of your team, we are thrilled that Cities of Learning has grown and developed beyond the initial tech platform, to an integrated social innovation in seven UK cities."**

**Tom Kenyon**

Programme Lead, Cities of Learning, RSA



# Change for a better future

## The VocTech Seed Grant Fund

VocTech Seed is our test bed where the first spark of an idea can be scoped and tested in the supportive environment that Ufi funding provides. Many of our previous VocTech Seed funding rounds have had a lasting impact on those that have received the grants, either supporting the MVP for new products and services or in transforming the way the organisation leading the project thinks about digital learning.

In 2021 we welcomed our 7th VocTech Seed cohort, and it's turning out to be a very exciting set of project ideas. In May we offered over £750k in grant funding to 15 projects who are well on their way to success. We have had the usual ups and downs that you'd expect developing an early-stage idea, moments of clarity and times when everything was difficult – developing during a pandemic takes resilience!

With all the organisations we support we focus on giving them the best chances of success through our 'Grant Plus' model. In 2021 we continued to provide (virtual) opportunities to enrich our grant funding opportunities to connect, network and access expertise to support projects on the way to achieving their ambitions.

Everything we fund is designed to solve a real problem in vocational learning. We have included some examples on the following page, or you can explore our online VocTech Directory.



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**The team at Ufi are really invested in the success of our idea. We've really valued the support on evaluation – tools, tips and techniques for how to measure that you're really having an impact. As a result, we created a new Theory of Change for our organisation which has helped us win several new client contracts and gain additional funding.”**

**Ronnie Wilson**  
Chief Executive – First Step Trust



**The British Pest Control Association** is creating a formalised and accredited assessment process, using a simulated 3D environment; because you can't always guarantee the right pests will turn up when they are needed for assessment purposes.



**Gower College Swansea** have developed a 'Virtual Librarian' chatbot. As a college that serves a large, rural population this transforms how learners can access study support services without having to travel.



**Autonome In-Work Support** provides support to adults with learning disabilities to get the skills they need to transition into employment and stay in work, with a focus on transferable knowledge, mental health and well-being in partnership with the Local Government Association, NHS Digital and six local authorities.



**Game Academy** is part of a trend to move many forms of learning from a visible to an invisible process. By combining what we know about how people learn in "the real world" - through experience, enjoyably, often invisibly - with the power of technology to focus and guide; the gamers who use the platform develop a better understanding of their skills and potential employment opportunities.



# Ufi Ventures

## Maximising our impact in a maturing investment landscape

2021 was the year we identified a new opportunity for Ufi to broaden our investment approach. Previously Ufi Ventures had focused on later-stage investments where there was more evidence of market traction. But as the vocational technology market has matured and become better served by more investors, we saw an opportunity, and a need, to support earlier-stage companies with pre-seed investment.

Ufi is perhaps uniquely placed, because of its financial independence and attitude to risk, to be able to consider proposals where there is a first glimmer of potential and help companies build their investment proposition with pre-seed investments, usually around £75k for pre-revenue companies with simple MVP solutions in place. We look forward to sharing the results of this new exploration in future Annual Reviews.

2021 saw us welcome two new companies to the Ufi Ventures portfolio, CAPSLOCK and Springpod. We also made further investments into Sonic Jobs, Learnably and Learning Labs. We are keen to be a long-term investor for the companies that we work with, helping to bring them to the point of scale-up where the market recognises the full value of their solutions.



### CAPSLOCK

**CAPSLOCK** is an education institute offering learners intensive 'bootcamp' training, starting in cyber-security. The programme is delivered entirely within a collaborative digital learning environment that has been built to simulate real working scenarios.

They remove barriers to reskilling in high demand sectors, enabling those looking to retrain to access quality work, without having to pay a penny until they've landed a high-paying job.

We are delighted that CAPSLOCK have now secured an important partnership with BT which should see them go from strength to strength.



### Springpod

**Springpod** is an online careers platform working with colleges, employers and universities to provide life-changing virtual career experiences and opportunities to young adults.

Providing work experience in an online setting removes the cost of travel barrier of in-person work experience and enables students to get a foot in the door by experiencing top employers and universities so that they can take well-informed next steps.

Over 184,000 young people enrolled in Springpod's virtual work experience programmes during 2021, with an average experience rating of 8.5/10.



## The Ufi Ventures Portfolio

At the end of 2021 there were seven companies in the Ufi Ventures portfolio.

In addition to CAPSLOCK and Springpod they were:



Personal learning budgets within workplace learning.



Immersive soft skills training using VR and mobile devices.



Technology that makes language learning accessible for all.



Supporting early years professionals to give kids a head start.



Helping job seekers find high-quality employment.



We've worked hard to ensure the process of engaging with the Ufi Ventures investment team is as simple as possible.

We now offer a five-day turnaround on initial decisions for investment; encouraging more companies to pitch their ideas and see if our investment could be a good fit with their needs.

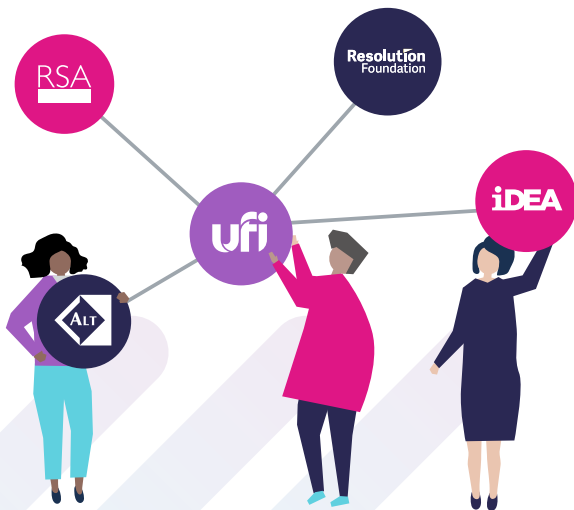
If you are looking for early-stage investment you can get in touch and send us your pitch deck at [ufi.co.uk/ventures](https://ufi.co.uk/ventures).



## Strategic Partnerships

Our strategic partnerships are not about single projects or activities, instead they focus on catalysing systems change and creating the conditions for the adoption and deployment of VocTech in the UK.

With this goal in mind we increased our number of strategic partnerships from one to four. When we report again next year, there will be even more to share here. But for now, here are some highlights from the three strategic partnerships that were formalised in 2021, and an update on progress from our partnership with the Resolution Foundation.



**We know we can't achieve our mission alone, so in 2021 we took the decision to build a handful of strategic partnerships with organisations who share our mission; helping maximise our collective impact and accelerate the pace of change."**

**Louise Rowland**  
Ufi Deputy CEO



**Resolution**  
Foundation

### Ufi & The Resolution Foundation The Workertech Partnership

Now in its third year the Workertech Partnership continued to make progress towards its aim of supporting social entrepreneurs and start-ups focused on improving conditions and career paths for workers stuck in low-paid and precarious employment.

Several early-stage investments have been made, supported by a strong ecosystem, bringing together the various partners supporting the Workertech fund, offering support through shared comms resources, and introductions to a wide network of contacts.





RSA

## Ufi & The RSA

Drawing on The RSA's deep policy, research and systems change expertise and Ufi's practical, actionable insights, we are working together to unite people, places and ideas to demonstrate how tech can help tackle the UK skills crisis.



iDEA

## Ufi & iDEA

Ufi and iDEA are working together to leverage the reach and insights gained from the iDEA platform, creating a step-change in digital skills and confidence for vocational learners in the UK.



ALT

## Ufi & The Association for Learning Technology (ALT)

Ufi and ALT are invested in a long-term partnership to develop the supportive and connected community of practice, #AmplifyFE; creating a lasting legacy of high-quality digital learning, teaching and assessment in vocational education.



# Supporting the market

Ufi is committed to supporting the sector to develop and deploy digital technologies, supporting bright ideas to flourish and equipping Vocational Education and Training (VET) professionals with the skills and confidence that they need to adopt 'digital first' into their practice.

## #AmplifyFE: A growing community of practice for VET practitioners

We believe that vibrant, engaging networks have a key role to play in helping VET practitioners build their digital pedagogical skills and confidence to enhance how vocational learning in the UK happens.

During 2021 engagement with the #AmplifyFE community of practice more than doubled to 1,100 professionals, well on the way to our goal of nurturing an active community of 2,500 professionals.



## VocTeach: Supporting vocational educators' skills development

2020 highlighted the need for vocational trainers and educators to access great online resources to support online and blended teaching. However, unlike other areas of edtech and professional development, vocational technology and learning lacks a peer-reviewed marketplace to make it quick and easy to locate quality vocational teaching resources.

In 2021, working with the Open University and Jisc, we completed our VocTeach proof of concept, testing whether an online platform could be built to support vocational educators who needed curriculum-relevant English and Maths Functional Skills content for their blended teaching. Our aim is that VocTeach will help teachers find more relevant resources with less effort; content will come to teachers rather than teachers needing to go in search of it. The development of VocTeach is ongoing, with a demonstrator platform due to launch to a small group of FE Colleges in Autumn 2022.

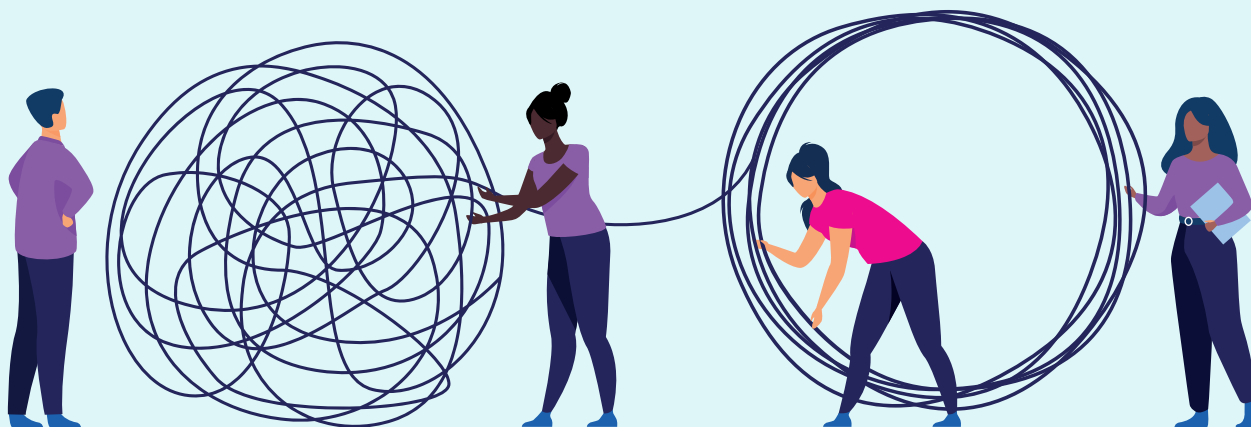




## VocTech Ignite

In 2021 we formalised our VocTech Ignite programme, offering it alongside every open grant call. By invitation only, Ignite is designed to support unsuccessful grant applicants whose ideas have real potential to make a difference, but who lack the experience or know-how to develop the idea into a digital solution.

In 2021 we supported eight organisations to work with Ufi to take a deep dive into their concept and build it into a strong proposal. Not all of them go on to apply to us again – sometimes the Ignite process itself is enough to show them how to take their idea to market, or to decide now isn't the right time. In 2021, seven "Ignite" organisations went on to successfully apply for Ufi funding, and it has been wonderful watching them develop.



## Helping Sempai make their ideas a reality

**PROBLEM:** UK Manufacturing isn't improving quickly enough to compete globally. Manufacturing Team Leaders are often unseen and neglected skills-wise, yet they hold the potential to be a big part of the solution to the UK's productivity problems.

**SOLUTION:** Ufi VocTech Ignite support helped Sempai become a successful grant-funded project that has now reached the point of live user testing, using learning design for digital and thinking about how the proof of concept will be commercialised at the end of the project.

**IMPACT:** Sempai has now developed their Digital Lean Toolkit App and went on to be nominated for the *Best learning technologies project category - Commercial sector* – at the Learning Technologies Awards 2021.



# Building the VocTech Community

Our long-term goal is to catalyse change by reaching out, influencing, engaging and working with others who can help us achieve our vision of change at scale.

Throughout 2021 we focused on changing the conversation about vocational education to one that considers the ways tech can enable skills development, increasing understanding by sharing stories and showing rather than telling. We can't achieve our mission alone and so have used our resources to create spaces for the sharing of ideas and the coming together of organisations on various stages of their VocTech journey.

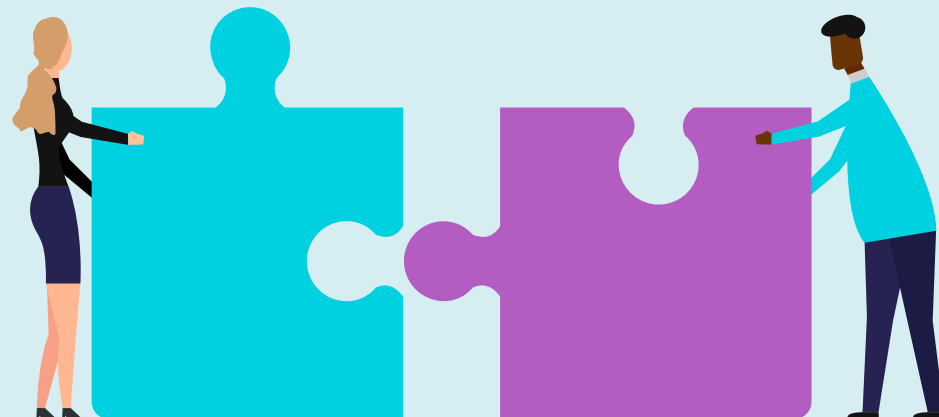
## Week of VocTech

Our Week of VocTech continues to grow, developing into a key activity in the VocTech calendar; the only programme of activity in the UK solely focused on tech for adult skills.

By providing a platform we can share with others we are raising our collective voices, extending our reach and convening conversations to make change happen.

Our programme for 2021 included 10 live events with 60 speakers, attracted more than 600 registrations and an online reach of 4,000 people from across the learning and employment sectors. Content from the week is available to watch online.





### The VocTech Podcast

We continued to produce our VocTech Podcasts throughout 2021, bringing together diverse voices to discuss a range of subjects aligned to the opportunities and impacts of vocational technology. Topics included immersive tools for frontline workers, impact investing in education and removing barriers to skills development. We have deliberately curated a broad range of speakers and perspectives to help engage new audiences and extend our reach, with over 7,372 downloads across the three episodes in 2021.



### VocTech Futures with FE News

To continue our engagement and support of the Further Education sector we developed a partnership with FE News and delivered an eight-week series of panel discussions exploring vocational technology, the opportunities and successes within further education. The series enabled us to bring together key partners, stimulate discussion and to spotlight some of the projects and individuals we have supported.



### Future-proofing skills development with Emerge Education, Coursera and Filtered

Together with our longer-term strategic partnerships, we have contributed our specific insights alongside partners on individual publications. The paper *Future-proofing skills development*, developed in collaboration with Emerge Education, Coursera and Filtered, supports how best to develop the necessary skills and to establish new pathways into jobs - highlighting the importance of being data driven, learner-centric and highly scalable. This forms part of our work to showcase “what good looks like” in order to support the VocTech marketplace.





## Public Advocacy

To truly address the challenges of the skills crisis and open up opportunities for the learners at the heart of Ufi's strategy - those not well served by mainstream education and training provision - in 2021 we began to talk more publicly about the need to transform the education system in its entirety, through the adoption of the very best digital tools and technology. By drawing on the rich experience of the organisations Ufi supports, our grant projects and Ufi Ventures, we demonstrate the art of the possible and inspire change.

Our small team is focusing on continued advocacy; spreading our message where it can be amplified to best effect. This includes increased engagement across the four Nations, through APPGs, policy consultations, Select Committee Enquiries and events; with a particular focus on those less well served by mainstream provision, the learners who are at the heart of our strategy.



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**Throughout 2021 we have been exploring new relationships and deepening partnerships, building strong foundations for longer term influence.”**

**Josh Smith**  
Ufi Public Affairs Manager

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# What's coming next? 2022 and beyond

By the time we publish our annual review, we have already started on the next year's activities. There are lots of things taking place in 2022 which we are excited to report on, but for now here's a selection of highlights:

- Continued commitment to giving all the organisations we support, our grants and our ventures, the best chance of success enriching our financial support with networking, connections and access to expertise
- We'll be refreshing our Theory of Change; reflecting how much has changed over the last few years
- We'll be completing our next Strategy Evaluation during 2022. We look forward to sharing the findings in January 2023
- We'll be releasing the details of the next VocTech Challenge
- We'll be announcing our favourite celebration of the year: Week of VocTech 2022, 14- 18 November

**To stay in touch with all our latest updates and news from the VocTech Community, please sign-up to our newsletter.**





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