

# Developing and delivering vocational technology

Insights from Ufi grant-funded projects



Ufi VocTech Trust supports the development of vocational technology to help adults gain the skills they need for work.

Between 2015 – 2019 we awarded over £14 million in grant funding to 117 projects which reached more than 2.6million adult learners.

As part of the external evaluation of our grant funding programmes, York Consulting asked grant recipients to reflect on the key lessons they have learned when developing vocational technology and the advice they would give to future recipients of funding from Ufi.

Over the following pages we share reflections and insights from more than 100 responses, grouped around the key themes that emerged.

We hope that the practical insights will be useful to anyone developing vocational technology or supporting others who are.

You can find explore the wider insights from our evaluation at [ufi.co.uk/evaluation](https://ufi.co.uk/evaluation).

## Jane Holmes

Head of Grant Programmes



# Overview

The insights that emerged from our projects can be grouped around four key themes.

## Project design

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- Know your market
- Consider the level of internal and senior buy-in
- Involve partners at the earliest stage possible
- Identify the skillset of the people that you need and consider the need for training

## Engaging with stakeholder and user groups

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- Early engagement is paramount
- Physical demonstrations of prototypes / technology can help secure engagement
- Do not underestimate the importance of good quality user-testing and the substantial number of varied users required
- Time and energy are required to support users through change

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- Be prepared and realistic about the intensive nature of VocTech development
- Flexibility and the ability to be agile are key

## The end product

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- Good quality user-experience is essential in encouraging engagement with content
- Do not underestimate the content needed for quality user experience and the product's potential for longevity
- Consider working with sector partners from the outset

# Project design

## **Start with the problem, not the solution**

Grant funded projects recommended identifying a clear need. Ensure this is well-researched and articulated. Clearly outline your project's desired change, outcomes, and impacts. Several projects suggest producing a Theory of Change and Logic Model, especially for larger projects deploying at scale.

## **Know your market**

Projects reflected that user attitudes, behaviours, and need should be at the heart of your solution to the problem. Products developed with a full understanding of how they will be used in daily life or work are more likely to succeed in securing engagement, interest, and investment. Directly consult target audiences prior to defining project objectives to ensure the right barriers are being addressed.

## **Consider the level of internal and senior buy-in**

Projects noted that senior team buy-in is essential to ensure delivery is committed, structured, and streamlined, and that issues can be mitigated. Time required to form strong relationships with senior teams should be built into the planning stages. It may be the case that extra non-financial support from Ufi is required.

## **Involve partners at the earliest stage possible**

Projects highlighted experiencing common project management issues and lack of delivery partner responsiveness. These can be mitigated by securing and documenting commitment with delivery partners at the outset.

## **Identify the skillset of the people you need and consider the need for training**

Developing VocTech products for market requires a variety of skills such as business and communication expertise. Projects recommended considering these when forming project teams and engaging with partners. Time and training may be required to ensure understanding, cohesion, effective working partnerships, and smooth delivery.



**Don't think 'this is a good idea, why does nobody understand it?'. It's your job to be able to sell and explain your idea so that people understand its uses and its benefits"**

- Grant recipient, 2018

## **Best chance of success**

We focus on achieving the best possible outcome for our funding by being an active and engaged funding partner, offering enrichment and expertise from the outset and developing long-term, supportive relationships.

# Engaging with stakeholder and user groups

## **Early engagement is paramount**

Grant funded projects highlighted that it is important to either mobilise support from existing networks early on or plan time to form relationships with relevant groups, ensuring that engagement continues throughout the project. Participating clients and stakeholders need to be engaged at the earliest opportunity and ongoing commitment needs to be formalised at key milestones.

## **Physical demonstrations of the product can help secure engagement**

Several projects reported that demonstrations of products in real settings were valuable in engaging the internal workforce and partners. Physical demonstrations to training partners helped gather enthusiasm for the product and encouraged contributions to the design of content.

## **Do not underestimate the importance of good quality user-testing and the substantial number of varied users required**

The key to many projects' success was extensive user-testing with stakeholders and learners to inform the iterative development of the product. This should happen at all stages of product development. This helps to ensure that products are relevant and can be used in real-life settings with a variety of different users.

## **Time and energy are required to support users through change**

Introducing new technological learning solutions can require culture change and the need to shift behaviours. Projects highlighted the importance of communicating what the positive changes are to users and stakeholders, particularly in challenging sectors. Time is required to lay the foundations for change, promote the benefits to users and get organisational buy-in throughout.



**“Take advantage of the help and support from Ufi when you’re applying for Ufi funding, engage in as many Ufi events as possible, such as their webinar events.”**

- Grant recipient, 2019

## **Supporting the VocTech community**

Ufi project account managers support grant recipients to make connections with other projects and communities to help tackle challenges that arise.

Looking to connect with others developing learning technologies? Explore the AmplifyFE Community of Practice at [amplifyfe.alt.ac.uk](https://amplifyfe.alt.ac.uk).

# Project delivery

## **Be prepared for the intensiveness of VocTech development**

Be realistic about the planning time, cost, resources, and technicalities of designing a digital solution within the allocated timeframe and budget. Preparation is key.

Projects are often operating in innovative spaces with cutting-edge technology and time is required to experiment. It is important that time is built in to deal with and resolve complex issues. Allow time for experimentation and problem solving.

## **Flexibility and the ability to be agile are key**

Although project objectives generally remained unchanged, feedback revealed that it is common for projects to need to shift approaches throughout delivery to achieve them. Projects often require a change in direction, redeploying resources, and reprioritising tasks critical to delivery. Be prepared to shift your approach, re-prioritise and change direction.



**“At the start it’s quite a lot of work but it helps get your thinking straight and focus on ‘How are we going to sustain this?’. It might not be the most fun, people have a great idea and want to get cracking, but it provides focus and slows things down, which is necessary and very valuable. And also makes you think about your responsibility to use the money wisely.”**

- Grant recipient, 2017

## **Supporting project delivery**

Ufi's project account managers use their experience, connections and 'have you thought about' model to support projects throughout their development.

With a flexible friendly approach, each project is given the best chance of success, with additional support that includes sessions on understanding critical intellectual property issues, thinking about learning design, and creating a set of key messages for customers or investors.

# The end product

## **Good quality user-experience is essential in encouraging engagement with content**

Several grant funded projects noted the importance of having good quality, well-functioning interfaces and programmes when engaging learners. Many users expect vocational technology to match the quality of the products they use in other areas of their lives. Poor functionality and design has the potential to disengage learners, particularly amongst younger audiences.

## **Do not underestimate the amount of content required to ensure a quality user experience and consider the relationships between the content and the product's longevity**

High-quality, engaging content takes time and resource to develop. Determine how you will update the content to keep it relevant to your users and consider whether your product could be tailored for multiple scenarios, audiences or sectors. For some projects, bringing content and authoring expertise in-house enhances their product's longevity. By becoming self-reliant in maintaining the product organisations can ensure products do not become outdated.

## **Consider working with sector partners from the outset**

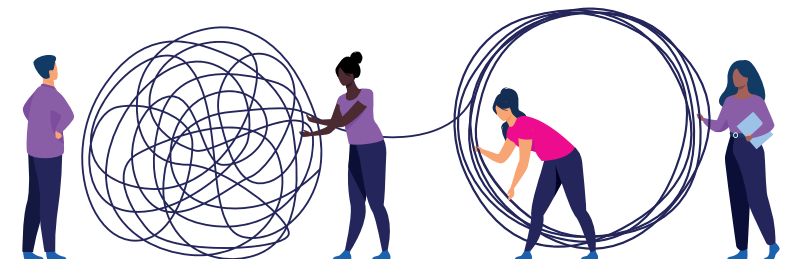
This was particularly recommended by projects working in more challenging sectors, where users are harder to reach and where projects can struggle to establish a route to market. It can be difficult to onboard partners when you just have an idea, rather than a tangible product.

To convince stakeholders to invest support, time, and resources, projects suggested focusing your early discussions on the need, intended change and resulting benefit, rather than the technological solution.

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**“Without the support of Ufi we would have significantly struggled to take our vision forward. The lessons during the process of idea development to impact have been a sharp learning curve. But we have learnt that to achieve the vision requires focus, analytical thinking, and a network of support/an ecosystem of collaboration.”**

- Grant recipient, 2018





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