Prison Strategy White Paper
Ministry of Justice

Ufi VocTech Trust Response
February 2022

Executive Summary

1. The UK's prisons and probation service needs to protect the public by holding offenders securely while they serve their sentence and rehabilitating them to reduce the chances of recidivism upon release. A quality education is fundamental to achieving a safe and secure prison population and to reducing reoffending rates.

2. The future of the UK's education system needs to be considered in its entirety. Within the education system, the importance of a high calibre and digitally advanced prison education, which has at its core vocational and informal learning, must not be overlooked.

3. Providing the right training and skills in an effective and cost-efficient manner is critical for improving prison security and reducing reoffending. The digital tools and technology that Ufi VocTech Trust supports present a tried and tested way to deliver the prison education system that the UK needs.

4. The UK must address the fundamental inconsistency and fragmentation of the prison system by developing a strategy that is focused on reducing reoffending rates and improving chances of employment through the adoption and understanding of digital learning methods. These technologies need to be a core part of the strategy to adapt a quality education to prison life and improving prisoners' chances at securing stable employment.

5. Technology that enables learning and training must be embedded throughout vocational education in prisons. Our experience supporting projects that are developing and deploying innovative technology, such as contextual learning, in-cell access to technology, and digital pathways into stable employment, show us the necessity of their central role in improving behaviour in prison and reducing reoffending in the long-term.

6. The UK's criminal justice system must adopt a comprehensive strategy for prison education that integrates the importance of vocational education and the potential for technology to improve outcomes for learners, future employers, and society as a whole.

Recommendations

7. To achieve the Government's goal, of creating a prison system that securely detains offenders while reducing recidivism, it requires a comprehensive national strategy that integrates effective and cost-efficient technology with prison education that prepares offenders for work. To accomplish this, Government needs to:

   a) <u>Be Strategic</u> – A national strategic framework is required to set high standards for prison education and the technology that should support it. Current education efforts are ineffective and costly, we believe that technology deployed as part of a strategic approach can improve outcomes in prison education and security.

   b) <u>Improve Infrastructure</u> – To ensure prison education can support rehabilitation, a national framework for prison education must provide for a high and consistent standard of wi-fi access, data sharing, and cross-prison tracking of learning and progress. This will allow individual governors to adapt their education offering to the needs of prisoners, using transferable solutions, like digital badging, to allow prisoner's learning to be tracked throughout their period of incarceration.

   c) <u>Set High Standards for Content</u> – For prisoners to secure positive opportunities at the end of their sentence, a national framework must ensure a minimum standard of quality in all education content. Technology has the capacity to make developing skills more relevant to individual prisoners, through processes like initial assessment or self-selecting modular content, and it is essential that prison education meets high standards that ensure prisoners develop useful and work relevant skills.

8. Using a national strategic framework to approach using technology in prison (with suitable safeguards), would then give governors the capacity to access a wider range of scalable, effective, and cost-efficient technology that supports the improvement of skills for work.

The Key Points

- An overarching strategy, that connects prison education and technology, can **address the inconsistency and fragmentation** of the prison system. Technology, well integrated into prison education through a cohesive national strategy, offers prison learning the capacity to adapt more effectively and cost-efficiently to individuals, whether it's through pre-diagnostic questionnaires and quizzes, AI and tracking, or self-selection of modular content.

- When technology is successfully integrated into prison education, it **supports security** by giving prisons the capacity to engage and support offenders wherever they are. With a broad and overarching strategy behind a digitally advanced prison education it would be possible to map learner data, improve credentialling, and give prisoners the opportunity to gain skills that are recognised by employers.

- To **reduce recidivism,** it is essential to maintain a relationship to education throughout an offender's transition from prison to probation and onto secure employment. Technology can support prisoners by preparing them for the workplace and connecting them to employers increasing their chances of succeeding on the outside.

Introduction to Ufi VocTech Trust

9. Ufi 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.

10. We are a charity which has provided over £20m to over 200 organisations, developing technology and digital tools for adult learners. In the last year, we have supported over 100 organisations with £2.1 million in grant funding and over £1.5m in venture investment.

11. We believe that people should be able to learn new skills throughout their adult lives, and that learning skills for work can be transformed when supported by technology.

12. Our practical experience, earnt through grant funding projects and investing in new businesses, shows us how prison education can be improved, to support prisoners in gaining the skills they need for stable and secure employment upon release.

13. 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 for work, and that is also true within prisons.

Consultation Response

14. In the Prisons Strategy White Paper, the Government outlines several proposals to support prison education, this includes committing to[1]:

- *Invest in the digital and data platform needed to develop personal learning plans for prisoners.*
- *The Prisoner Education Service will integrate learning and skills across the prison regime, better support literacy and numeracy and provide clearer and stronger expectations.*
- *Give Governors the tools they need to deliver high-quality learning, training, and skills, and hold prisons to account for the job opportunities and outcomes they achieve for prisoners.*
- *Hiring new Education, Work and Skills Specialists, and Support Managers for prisoners with conditions such as learning disabilities, autism, acquired brain injury or ADHD.*
- *Establish an Employability Innovation Fund.*
- *Start market engagement with a range of providers.*
- *Establish a 'Literacy Innovation Scheme'.*
- *Develop new digital content and expand the use of secure laptops.*
- *Invest in staff training.*

15. Ufi VocTech Trust believes that technology is essential to the successful design and delivery of vocational education in prisons. We were therefore pleased to see the Government's recent commitment to using technology throughout the prison education system.[2] The push to digitise prison and allow for in cell education is necessary for the successful rehabilitation of prisoners, and the appreciation that the rollout of technology is starting from a low base allows for an honest assessment of the journey that there is yet to travel[3]. However, for vocational education to have its fullest effect on prison security and reoffending rates it is essential that the prison education system is considered in its entirety, with digitally advanced vocational and informal learning at its core, and able to adapt to the inconsistent nature of the prison experience.

16. The Government's proposals are all to be welcomed, and if well designed and delivered they should go some of the way to giving prisoners the skills they need to secure stable employment on release. Others have demonstrated the academic evidence for driving forward with tech-based learning in prisons, demonstrating its impact on reoffending rates and prisoner behaviour.[4] However, our experience supporting projects that are developing and deploying innovative technology inside and outside of the prisons sector has taught us several lessons that we believe the Government should be aware of when designing and deploying vocational education in prisons.

17. The biggest challenges that our projects face relate to the fundamental and often necessary inconsistency across the prison and probation service. The lack of both joined up delivery and strategy mean that prison learners are left unable to follow an unfragmented learning path. Prisoners have the wide ranges of experience, educational background, and learning challenges that all people have, but there are also many and diverse challenges that effect learning, such as security, access and a highly mobile population moving between differently equipped prisons. Our projects have found that to develop successful programmes for prisoners, it is essential to take a connected and strategic approach that allows individual governors to benefit from the opportunities of scale in data, cost, and time.

[1] Ministry of Justice, *Prisons Strategy White Paper, December 2021,* link
[2] HMPPS, *Digital, Data and Technology Strategy, 2021,* link
[3] Education Select Committee, *Prison Education Inquiry – Oral Evidence,* 18 January 2021, link
[4] CSJ, *Digital Technology in Prisons,* January 2021, link

18. Throughout this consultation response we draw attention to several projects that we have supported. The projects in these case studies have all operated within the UK's prison and probation sector helping prisoners gain the skills they need to succeed in work. They demonstrate how tech-supported education can be used to improve prison security by reducing staff workload and engaging prisoners; how it can reduce reoffending by connecting learning opportunities to employment and supporting transitions; and how it can support the inconsistency and fragmentation of the prison sector ensuring that all prisoners get the opportunities they need.

Addressing Inconsistency and Fragmentation

19. Prison and prisoners are inconsistent. The prison estate, its suppliers and the strategies that are designed to support offenders are fragmented and lack a cohesive strategy that integrates the benefit of technology and the transformative power of education. Prisoners have incredibly complex needs and learning requirements which are often left unaddressed and result in learning that is inappropriate, badly targeted, and unable to give prisoners the skills they need to succeed upon release. Technology, well integrated into prison education through a cohesive national strategy, offers prison learning the capacity to adapt more effectively and cost-efficiently to individuals, whether it's through pre-diagnostic questionnaires and quizzes, AI and tracking, or simple self-selection from modular content. One of our projects that demonstrates technologies power to adapt to a learner's ability is the Passive Accreditation in Prisons project with Fluence.

Case Study: Passive Accreditation in Prisons – Fluence[5]

In prisons, learning providers must address the challenge of delivering training within a complex and transient environment where learners may be moved to another institution or released before their qualification can be completed. The learner group is diverse, with many fundamental and long-term learning problems. As a result of these challenges, existing methods of diagnosis and assessment have proved inefficient and of poor quality. Therefore, Fluence developed a highly accurate, Artificial Intelligence-assisted decision-making engine that emulates the decision logic of educators and allows for learning to be tailored to the challenges of each learner.

In the Passive Accreditation project, learning providers can input content, such as work assignments, into the Fluence engine, along with decisions made about the content (e.g., grades) and an algorithm learns to replicate the decision logic of educators on all future content. Fluence can apply this auto-grading technology to both formal learning and 'naturally occurring evidence' based on the work produced by prisoners on site. It can provide evidence of their abilities, as well as assessing them up front. This turns the process of assessment and accreditation into a silent process, happening invisibly in the background, allowing teachers to focus on teaching.

Through this project, the technology was able to support a step change in prison education by improving the accreditation of vocational learning for 85,000 vulnerable learners. The project's innovative use of technology allowed one of the most diverse collections of learners to be accurately assessed, making it more likely that they could get the right training that will equip them with the skills they need to secure stable employment on release.

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[5] Ufi VocTech Trust, *Passive Accreditation in Prisons – Fluence,* link

20. Without a cohesive education strategy that integrates technology, prison education will continue to rely on traditional methods that create burdensome duties on staff and fail to adapt to the needs of prisoners. If prison governors are to provide each prisoner with access to learning that is entirely relevant and appropriate, then technology is key. Technology allows for learner needs to be individually assessed and solutions to be provided that can follow learners from prison to prison. The solution is for the Government to adopt a comprehensive education strategy where technology forms the core of prison education.

Supporting Security

21. Many organisations have demonstrated the impact education and technology can have on prisoner behaviour and therefore prison security.[6] However, the problem with traditional prison learning, and existing approaches to tech-based learning, is the reliance on the use of fixed facilities like libraries and learning centres. The pandemic forced most learning to either stop or take place in limited circumstances in cells. When learning was able to occur in cells it highlighted prisoners' capacity to complete learning in different environments and showed that the obvious solution is to provide in-cell, networked learning on tablets or similar devices. Ufi has been working for the last four years with Meganexus on the delivery of their Nucleus in Cell Technology/VC2go project. This project has been able to demonstrate the capacity of technology to reach prisoners where they spend most of their time and enable access to high quality learning. It is when prisoners can learn everywhere, be occupied with fulfilling and advancing work that prison security improves.

Case Study: Nucleus in Cell Technology – Meganexus[7]

Ufi has been working with Meganexus and their Nucleus in Cell project since 2018. The original aim was to transform the provision of education in custody and provide educational and vocational learning opportunities to users inside prison cells. Using secure mobile devices to allow for access to distance learning for up to 85,000 incarcerated individuals and 260,000 probationers whose opportunities for learning are limited.

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic the project had to adapt, using the technology that had been developed and developing a new relationship with the Ministry of Justice, Meganexus (still supported by Ufi) were able to continue with the re-titled "VC2go" project by using an appropriate and diverse mix of technologies through what came to be called "the differentiated offering".

The aim of this project did not change. It continues to accelerate rehabilitation journeys through digital inclusion for all prisoners going through the criminal justice system. This project affords people access to educational and vocational resources delivered via a secure device inside prison and via any internet-enabled device in probation.

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22. In prisons without technology well embedded within their education programme, during the pandemic, prisoners were often left completing work sheets in their cells alone. With technology successfully integrated prisons can have the capacity to engage and support inmates wherever

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[6] CSJ, *Digital Technology in Prisons,* January 2021, link
[7] Meganexus, link

they are in prison. Furthermore, with a broad and overarching strategy behind a digitally advanced prison education it would be possible to map learner data, introduce micro-credentialling, and give prisoners the opportunity to gain skills that are recognised by employers. This would mean that prisons would be able to take full advantage of the very best innovative technology outside of prison, like that demonstrated by the iDEA awards,[8] and could offer offenders the option to take mini courses, earn badges and far more.

Reducing Recidivism

23. A key challenge in reducing recidivism is how to support offenders going from prison into probation and onto secure employment. Maintaining a relationship to education, throughout the transition, is essential and unfortunately learning is often cut short and facilities are lost. Prisoners need to have both learnt skills which are directly relevant to employment upon release whilst they are in prison, and to have the opportunity to access resources that can help support them into stable employment. The existing systems of learning, as a former Chief Inspector of Prisons has identified, often leaves prisoners "woefully unprepared for the real world they will face on release"[9]. Two Ufi projects have demonstrated technologies capacity to address these problems and give prisoners the best chance to succeed on the outside.

24. Firstly, we worked with NIACRO to develop a Virtual Reality construction industry facing project that builds assessment into the learning and successful completion of real-world tasks in VR. Prisoners are able as part of the programme to experience inside the prison what they are likely to see on construction sites outside the prison. Technology allows for the effective rehearsal of skills that they will need in a real job on the outside and prepares prisoners for the transition to life on probation before it happens.

Case Study: SITE IT - NIACRO [10]

Many prisoners have complex vocational learning challenges including poor essential skills, a lack of qualifications and little work experience. Construction is often a sector of choice to secure employment once they leave prison. SITE IT is developing and testing an immersive training experience in construction Health & Safety, to be delivered in the prison environment using Virtual Reality, to prepare prisoners for the workplace.

Learners, selected from the prison population, work through three distinct learning zones within a virtual building site, undertaking and being progressively assessed on tasks along the way, all forming units of an OCN Level 1 qualification in Health & Safety in a Construction Environment. The project is delivered through headsets (where an internet connection is not required), and the application captures how learners perform in the virtual tasks and a 'debrief' session with a construction trainer forms a part of the learners' experience.

The Construction Industry Training Board Northern Ireland (CITBNI) has helped to guide the development process and engage construction employers in the testing to ensure the content is 'fit for purpose' for those hoping to secure work in construction. Post-release work placements are also being offered to learners to support their transition.

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[8] iDEA, *Inspiring Digital Enterprise Awards,* link
[9] Prison Reform Trust, *Through the Gateway: How Computers Can Transform Rehabilitation,* 2013, link
[10] Ufi VocTech Trust, *SITE IT – NIACRO,* link

25. Secondly, Ufi supported a project with Socrates Software that supported probationers to tackle unemployment and help reduce reoffending rates. The statistics show[11] that relatively few prisoners are in full time work a few weeks after leaving prison. So, this project uses digital technology to create clearer pathways to employment, enabling a prisoner to choose the job they want and then showing them the steps, skills, and qualifications that they need. This project proved a benefit to employers, as it increases the quality and appropriateness of the people that employers encounter when they want to recruit from the prison sector.

Case Study: Way to Work – Socrates Software [12]

Socrates Software's platform was built to offer detailed job pathways, with up to date, personalised information about jobs and the skills and qualifications required for them.

Relevant learning and training content was included within the pathways and will be linked to real job opportunities with partner employers, who are able to provide their own training modules and other content for candidates.

The project uncovered a significant gap where learners needed much more support as they moved from one system to another and lost continuity in their learning. The project-built partnerships that have helped Socrates Software to effectively support these hard-to-reach learners at a critical time in their lives.

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26. Without technology, developing construction skills or connecting prisoners to job opportunities would require burdensome and inefficient bureaucracy, which would be cumbersome for prisoners' transition to life on probation. Both case studies demonstrate how technology can connect learners inside prison to clear pathways which lead to job opportunities with partnered employers where they have the skills that give them the best chance of succeeding in the long term. With better connections to work and maintained relationships to education, throughout the transition from prison to probation, recidivism can be reduced.

Conclusions

27. The continued development and deployment of learning technology inside and outside of the prison sector is essential to ensuring the success of the Government's ambitions. While the Government's individual proposals are all to be welcomed, they lack an overarching national strategy which allows for digital technology to be integrated throughout prison education.

28. Our projects demonstrate how tech-supported education can be used to improve prison security by engaging prisoners; how it can reduce reoffending by connecting learning opportunities to employment; and how it can support the inconsistency and fragmentation of the prison sector ensuring that all prisoners get the opportunities they need.

29. It is critical that the Government develops an overarching strategy that integrates joined-up prison education with an open approach to technology that supports offenders to create a more secure prison environment, reduce the chances of recidivism and helps mitigate the inconsistency of prison life.

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[11] Ministry of Justice, *Employment at Six Weeks Following Release,* link
[12] Ufi VocTech Trust, *Way To Work – Socrates Software, link*

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