

Evaluation of the VILA Hub: Virtual Inclusive Learning Academy Project

Document Review Technical Report

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1.0 Introduction

This Document Review Technical Report was conducted as part of the evaluation of the Virtual Inclusive Learning Academy (VILA) project led by Developing and Nurturing Independence (DANI) and funded by the Future Skills Centre (FSC) over a two-year period. This evaluation is part of the broader Strategic Evaluation and Learning Support for FSC, for which Goss Gilroy Inc. (GGI) was engaged in order to capture project knowledge and generate learning reports for a number of FSC-funded projects.

This report contains findings obtained from program documents, aligned with the evaluation questions and indicators. Background information about the project, including purpose, scope and objectives are also included.

1.1 Background¹

Developing and Nurturing Independence (DANI) is a community-focused, Toronto-based not-for-profit organization created to support people with disabilities. Originally established as a parent advocacy group, DANI now runs a number of social enterprise businesses and programs, including a Supported Employment Program (SEP), across two locations in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The purpose of the program is to help people with disabilities and their families build important life and vocational skills and meaningful relationships.

Project Description²

The Virtual Learning Academy (VILA) is a 24-month, comprehensive educational and social virtual hub implemented in March 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to pivot DANI's programs and services to a virtual model—in other words, VILA is DANI's "online campus." This was particularly critical to counter the additional physical, mental and social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic to which people with intellectual disabilities (ID) are especially vulnerable. According to DANI, VILA was the first hub "serving all Canadians in this marginalized population who face systemic challenges and barriers, economically and socially."

As such, through its person-centred approach and curriculum, the objective of the VILA Hub is to provide life skills, academic and job training, and work opportunities as well as engagement opportunities to adults with ID in order to increase employment readiness and job acquisition skills, build relationships, and combat social isolation and poverty.

¹ DANI. *About Us*. <https://dani-toronto.com/about-us/>

² DANI Application for Innovation Project Funding.



Project Objectives³

The objectives of the project were:

- Create an accessible learning environment to ensure equity, diversity and inclusion;
- Create an annual curriculum review;
- Enhance vocational skills for people with disabilities;
- Conduct outreach to underserved communities of individuals with disabilities such as rural, newcomer, indigenous communities/reserves and racialized communities across Ontario; and
- Foster a supportive network of individuals with disabilities and their families to enhance well-being and combat social isolation.

Theory of Change

A theory of change explains how an intervention is expected to produce its results.⁴

The Problem

Over 50% of Canadians with ID report experiencing barriers to vocational training services. The impacts of this are significant—adults with ID have a 75% unemployment rate, 27% are considered low income, and many suffer from social isolation and a lack of support. These needs were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic in increasing the physical, mental and social isolation to which adults with ID are acutely vulnerable. Therefore, the VILA Hub initiative was designed to address the needs of adults with ID relating to vocational training and social engagement whilst circumventing accessibility barriers to training by establishing a virtual hub offering extensive, culturally appropriate and person-centred skills teaching and social opportunities.

Target Groups

This project primarily targets persons with disabilities, in particular those from rural, remote and northern communities; newcomers; people with essential skills gaps; and people without post-secondary education.

Mechanisms of Change

This project posits that a combination of virtual vocational training and social engagement can better equip adults with ID to enter the workplace and increase job readiness, confidence, and personal independence by providing an accessible opportunity for participants to build the skills

³ DANI Annual Report 2021-2022.

⁴ Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, *Theory-Based Approaches to Evaluation: Concepts and Practices*, <https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/audit-evaluation/evaluation-government-canada/theory-based-approaches-evaluation-concepts-practices.html#toc4>



not historically presented to adults with ID, receive academic and job training, and build relationships, combat social isolation, increase self-acceptance and decrease internalized stigma.

Outputs

The outputs are the 'products' of the above activities, or those primarily impacted. The primary outputs of the VILA Hub platform and the bi-monthly social events and WhatsApp chats are participants with IDs. The primary outputs of the Annual Curriculum Review are DANI supporters, leaders, families and followers.

Immediate outcomes

The **immediate outcomes** are the changes that are expected to come from these activities and outputs, in a short period, and largely attributable to the project. The expected immediate outcomes of the VILA Hub platform and bi-monthly social events and WhatsApp chats are the creation of an accessible learning environment and a supportive network for PWD and their families, as well as the enhancement of vocational skills for PwD. Furthermore, the immediate outcome of the Annual Curriculum Review is the sharing of learnings with other organizations.

Intermediate outcomes

The **intermediate outcomes** are the changes expected in the medium term to which the project is expected to contribute, at least in part. It is expected that participants will have more confidence, personal independence, social engagement and job readiness and that participants are better equipped to integrate into the workplace. It is also expected that as a result of learnings from the Annual Curriculum Review being shared with other organizations, organizations will then integrate vocational training for PWD into their own practices.

Long-term outcomes

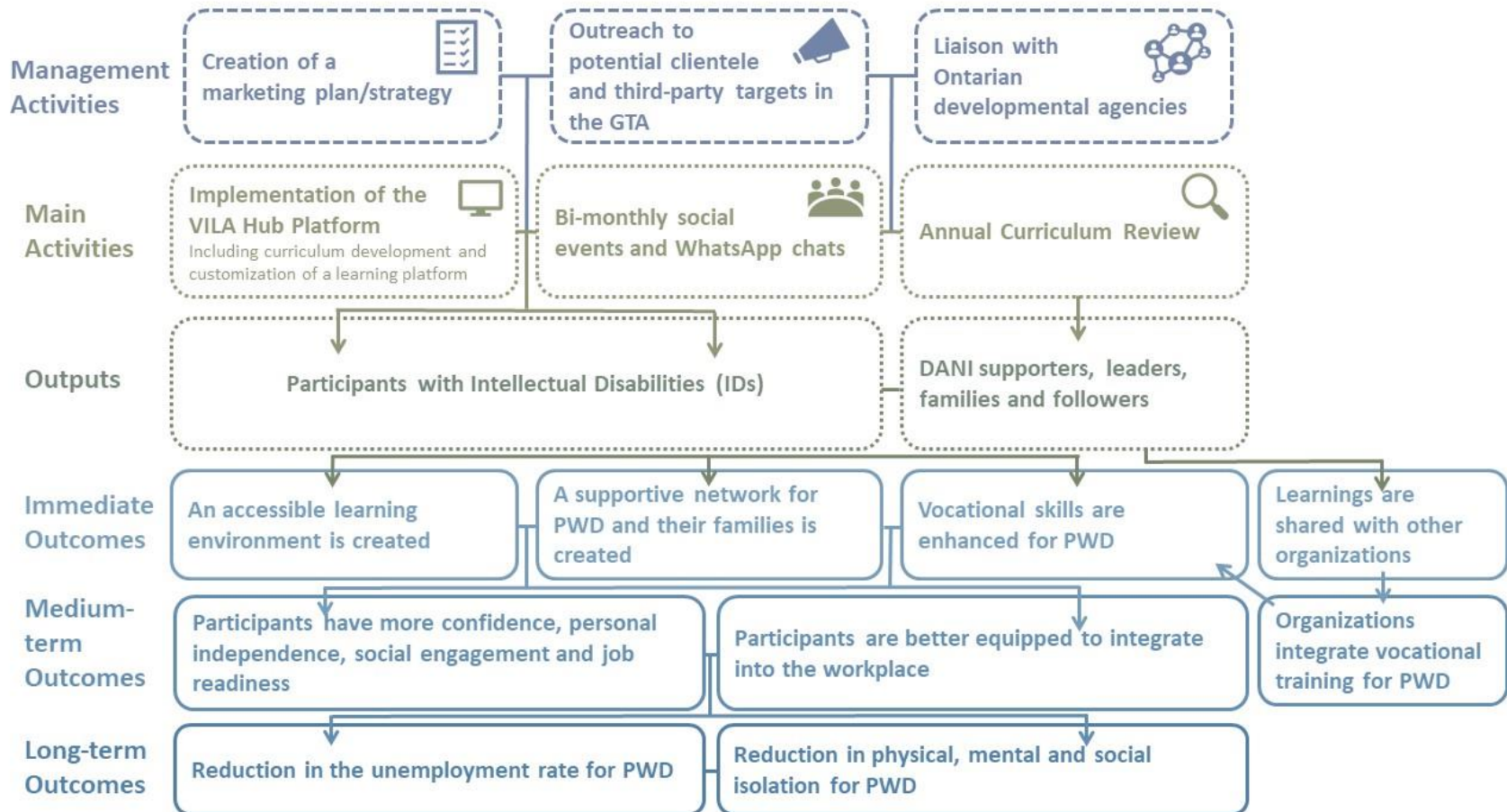
Finally, the **long-term outcomes** are the changes that may result at a later time in the future. As a concept, medium and long-term outcomes are less directly attributable to an intervention (i.e. the project) alone, since other intervening factors play a role over time. In this case, it is expected that the project may make some contribution to a reduction in the unemployment rate for PWD and a reduction in physical, mental and social isolation for PWD.

Assumptions

One key assumption that this results chain depends upon is that there are employment opportunities available to adults with ID, especially in their fields of interest. Furthermore, the project also assumes that other organizations with whom learnings are shared will then be sufficiently motivated to then integrate vocational training into their own practices (and that there are PWD in their workforces).

Logic Model for DANI's VILA Hub Project

Figure 1: Project Logic Model



1.2 Contextualization – Access of Adults with ID to Vocational Training

Adults with ID frequently encounter delays in receiving vocational training compared to those without ID, which then has a negative impact on their ability to secure and sustain employment (Khayat-zadeh-Mahani et al., 2020) as well as on their overall quality of life (Cannella-Malone & Schaefer, 2017). In one study, PWD identified a few key vocational challenges, namely a “lack of adaptability to change, difficulty with new tasks, or deviation from routines” (Khayat-zadeh-Mahani et al., 2020). These challenges have also been associated to limited exposure or education around workplace culture (e.g., workplace norms, rules, social nuances) in secondary school, which is essential to PWD in particular to enter the job market and maintain employment. However, lack of vocational training is not the only barrier to employment, and is combined with other barriers such as employer attitudes and stigma playing a significant role.

Moreover, discrepancies in access to vocational training as well as overall employment vary between PWD. According to Lindsay et al. (2017), gender often defines the “career aspirations of people with disabilities,” “whether they engage in vocational training” and their success in “finding meaningful employment,” with women with disabilities “more likely to be unemployed, to work fewer hours, in lower status occupations, and for significantly less pay than men with disabilities” (Lindsay et al., 2017). It is also noted that women have more limited access to vocational training and are more likely to be in greater need of it as a result of a number of factors such as “poorer social and communication skills” and “decreased self-confidence” (Lindsay et al., 2017).

2.0 Scope and Methodology

2.1 Evaluation Objectives and Scope

Objectives

Considering that this project aimed to develop a new virtual hub, this review will primarily focus on the project's relevance, reach, design and delivery as well as the effectiveness of the project.

Scope

The scope of the review includes the period from the start of the contract between DANI and FSC until the present (i.e., March 5, 2021 to March 31, 2023). This will help capture and evaluate the different steps and processes involved in the project, as well as whether the project objectives were met.

2.2 Evaluation Questions

The document review line of evidence will examine issues of relevance, reach, design and delivery, as well as effectiveness. It will also examine any lessons learned. The following evaluation questions will be addressed:

Relevance

1. How does the program address the needs of adults with Intellectual Disabilities (ID)?

Reach

2. In what ways and to what extent did the project reach its intended target populations (i.e., underserved communities of individuals with disabilities such as rural, newcomer, northern and Indigenous communities/reserves and racialized communities across Ontario)?

Design and Delivery

3. To what extent was the project implemented as intended?
 - 3.1. Was the VILA Hub platform successfully implemented?
 - 3.2. To what extent were end-users involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of the project?
 - 3.3. Were modifications made to the design or delivery of the project?
4. How was equity, diversity and inclusion considered in the project's design and delivery?
5. Has an annual curriculum review been completed and disseminated appropriately?

Effectiveness

6. To what extent did/does the project meet its intended outcomes?
 - 6.1. How effective has the project been in creating an accessible learning environment to ensure equity, diversity and inclusion?
 - 6.2. How effective has the project been in enhancing vocational skills for people with disabilities?
 - 6.3. How effective has the project been in fostering a supportive network for people with disabilities and their families?

Table 1: Evaluation Matrix

Questions	Indicators	
Relevance		
EQ1: How does the program address the needs of adults with Intellectual Disabilities (ID)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of the needs of adults with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) seeking employment • Evidence that the format and activities of the project support these needs 	
Reach		
EQ2: In what ways and to what extent is the project reaching intended target populations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategies to reach target population • Intended number of participants • Number of people/organizations that have been informed about the launch of the program • Number of participants to the program • Potential reasons for any discrepancies in intended/actual participant numbers 	
Design and Delivery		
EQ3: To what extent was the project implemented as intended?	EQ 3.1: Was the VILA Hub Platform successfully implemented?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence that the VILA HUB platform was successfully established with a comprehensive, culturally-sensitive vocational training curriculum and content • Evidence that extra-curricular opportunities were provided for socializing and the nurturing of friendships • Evidence that an individualized, person-centred approach was implemented for each student

Questions	Indicators	
	EQ 3.2: To what extent were end-users involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of the project?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of end-user involvement (participants and instructors) • Evidence that the project was refined based off feedback
	EQ 3.3: Were modifications made to the design or delivery of the project?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence that the design or delivery of the project changed over time
EQ4: How was equity, diversity and inclusion considered in the project's design and delivery?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of the inclusion of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in the project 	
EQ5: Has an annual curriculum review been completed and disseminated appropriately?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Successful creation of the annual curriculum review 	
Effectiveness		
EQ6: To what extent did/does the project meet its intended outcomes?	EQ6.1: How effective has the project been in creating an accessible learning environment to ensure equity, diversity and inclusion?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of the creation of an accessible learning environment
	EQ6.2: How effective has the project been in enhancing vocational skills for people with disabilities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of Life indicators as reported by the individual and their support network, showing changes in confidence; personal independence; social engagement; and job readiness

Questions	Indicators	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completion rate for all Certificates (75% target) • Number of participants who earned a Vocational Achievement Certificate and produce a resume supplemented by their VILA experience
	EQ6.3: How effective has the project been in fostering a supportive network for individuals with disabilities and their families?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of networks, friendships and bonds formed between students and their families

3.3 Methodology

GGI implemented the evaluation based on a document review of documents provided by FSC. The document review contributed to evidence for all evaluation questions. Specifically, it provided background information on the origin and initial design of the project. The review of documents was key in order to understand how the project was intended to operate, and how it was actually implemented. Moreover, administrative data allowed to evaluate the reach of the program.

Key documents reviewed included:

- VILA Hub’s application for Innovation Project Funding;
- VILA Hub’s quarterly reports (Q1 2021, Q2 2021, Q3 2021, Q1 2022, Q2 2022; Q3 2022);
- VILA Hub’s annual report 2021–2022 and 2022–2023;
- VILA Hub’s Pilot Project Reviewer Assessment Forms (four); and
- VILA Hub’s Work Plan and Evidence Generation Form;
- VILA Hub’s PIF; and
- VILA Hub and FSC’s Funding Agreement.

The document review methodology was as follows:

- Review all documents in order, beginning with the Application for Funding and Reviewer Notes, Work Plan, Quarterly and Annual Reporting, and other documents, inputting and organizing key information into an Evaluation Matrix by Evaluation Question and Indicator;
- Once all documents were reviewed, translate Matrix findings into a concise narrative in the Report, returning to the matrix or documents as necessary to fill in any gaps; and
- Write conclusions for each Evaluation Question according to the findings.

Limitations

Project progress made in the fourth quarter of both the first and second financial years were not reported due to the absence of these reports among the documents provided.

3.0 Findings

Relevance

EQ1: How does the program address the needs of adults with Intellectual Disabilities (ID)?

Summary: By establishing a virtual hub offering extensive, culturally appropriate and person-centred skills teaching and social opportunities, the VILA Hub initiative addresses the needs of adults with ID relating to vocational training and social engagement whilst circumventing accessibility barriers to training. These needs were heightened with the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated social isolation and accessibility issues; VILA Hub was the result of the almost immediate pivoting to virtual service delivery, which early feedback showed DANI clients found highly receptive to their needs.

Needs of adults with ID⁵

According to the project proposal, around 686,000 Canadians have an ID, and over 50% also report experiencing barriers to vocational training services. The impacts are significant—adults with ID have a 75% unemployment rate. In fact, 27% of adults with ID are considered low income (compared to 9% without a disability). They also suffer from social isolation and a general lack of support. According to DANI, these needs were exacerbated with the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased the physical, mental and social isolation to which adults with ID are acutely vulnerable. As a result, adults with ID seeking employment have needs related to "vocational training, employment, social engagement, literacy and lifelong learning."

VILA and the needs of adults with ID⁶

The Virtual Learning Academy (VILA) is a 24-month, comprehensive educational and social virtual hub implemented in March 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to pivot DANI's programs and services to a virtual model—in other words, VILA is DANI's "online campus," designed to be a "hand-up, not a hand-out" to those who need its services. According to DANI, VILA was the first hub "serving all Canadians in this marginalized population who face systemic challenges and barriers, economically and socially."

This was particularly critical to counter the additional physical, mental and social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic to which people with ID are especially vulnerable. The Hub was implemented after the positive feedback received to DANI's initial online model developed in Spring 2020 at the onset of the pandemic, in order to build on its successes in a more concrete manner. The survey of

⁵ Application for Innovation Project Funding

⁶ Application for Innovation Project Funding

the program found that 99% found the virtual program to meet their needs while being socially isolated, and 92% felt it was an effective platform for skills development and learning.

The virtual format of the project is considered the main way in which the needs of adults with ID can be met as it aimed to overcome geographic barriers of accessibility, eliminating transportation barriers and barriers to service such as long waiting lists, and was especially designed “to make special efforts, both in recruitment and in curriculum development, to make the program accessible to indigenous, rural and northern populations.” Hence, DANI considers that “online learning ... is a very effective tool in skill development and can fill the critical service gap for individuals with ID in accessing vocational training.”

Participants are provided a forum to meet and engage in a virtual classroom and learn and share ideas with peers with similar interests and goals. Participants are also provided social opportunities outside of the classroom through bi-monthly social events and WhatsApp chats to allow participants to build relationships, combat social isolation, increase self-acceptance and decrease internalized stigma.

On the other hand, the VILA Hub relies on a person-centred approach and curriculum to facilitate the success of each student. All participants undergo a thorough intake process and collaborate with the intake team to develop goals related to their own needs. Students then choose a certificate path and courses that best support their goals around vocational training, employment, social engagement, literacy and lifelong learning. The Hub specifically focuses on skills not historically presented to people with ID, such as resume writing, professionalism in the workplace, and job interview skills. The earning of a Vocational Achievement Certificate is also critical which, to employers, constitutes evidence of motivation and commitment.

As a result, both the format (virtual, person-centred, individualized) and activities (blend of skills teaching and social engagement) appear to support the needs of adults with ID seeking employment by providing life skills, academic and job training, and work opportunities as well as engagement opportunities. This, in effect, increases employment readiness and job acquisition skills, builds relationships and combats social isolation and poverty, whilst circumventing accessibility barriers to training.

Reach

EQ2: In what ways and to what extent did the project reach its intended target populations?

Summary: Although the project made important efforts towards reaching its intended target populations, outreach in underserved communities across Ontario, outside of the GTA, was identified as challenging, and absence of recent documentation limits the assessment of further progress—for instance, whether collaboration with other community agencies and third-party

individuals took place and proved effective to meeting this challenge. Nonetheless, participation in the program across all forms of training exceeded original estimates.

Outreach strategies and progress

The following populations were identified as priority groups for the VILA Hub project: persons with disabilities; people from rural, remote and northern communities; newcomers; people with essential skills gaps; and people without post-secondary education.⁷

In the project application, DANI stated that "VILA will initially service individuals with IDs within the GTA, however, outreach across Canada will continuously be undertaken to increase VILA's scale so that it can reach a wider population," including those in remote areas. Hence, the Work Plan⁸ identifies the creation of a marketing plan to advertise in the GTA as a deliverable for the first year of the project (between January and August 2021). Outreach to rural areas and Indigenous peoples and communities was also specifically identified as something with which DANI would require assistance and was scheduled to take place in the second quarter of the project's second fiscal year (July–Sept 2022). The second fiscal year Work Plan also states that DANI would liaise with agencies in Ontario in the developmental sector to recruit potential candidates to the project (between June and December 2022). By October 2022, DANI stated that it had conducted outreach to direct potential clientele, third-party targets (e.g., support workers) and other "like-minded organizations in hopes of collaboration."⁹ However, these efforts are ongoing, and the 'decreasing relevance' of VILA as an online learning hub due to the COVID-19 pandemic were identified by DANI as a challenge.¹⁰

By the end of the project's first quarter (June 2021), DANI engaged a marketing specialist and created a marketing strategy to perform broad outreach and engage as many individuals as possible. Communications were then sent about the VILA Hub to community leaders, organizations and agencies.¹¹ By September 2021, outreach to communities within the GTA in which vocational training programs were needed was underway.¹² Research was conducted into the population needs of each community, and a contact list for social services, organizations and community living agencies seeking vocational training programs was drafted.¹³

Outreach beyond the GTA and recruitment of larger cohorts were identified as challenges in the project's third quarter (October–December 2021), complicated by changes to COVID-19 restrictions across the province. As of June 2022,¹⁴ DANI was in the process of addressing these challenges related to outreach in underserved communities across Ontario. DANI states it would

⁷ Application for Innovation Project Funding

⁸ DANI (VILA) Work Plan and Evidence Generation Form

⁹ Q2 Report 2022

¹⁰ Q2 Report 2022

¹¹ Q1 Report 2021

¹² Q2 Report 2021

¹³ Q2 Report 2021

¹⁴ DANI Q1 Report 2022

like to do so by making an effort to collaborate with other community agencies and service providers. Also, it recognized the importance of targeting third-party individuals (e.g., family members, support workers) instead of direct clientele through its promotional content which, as mentioned, were identified as having taken place by October 2022.

In December 2022, DANI stated that “VILA has become a resource for PWD in the community regarding employment and vocational training due to [their] outreach and expertise.”¹⁵

Program participation

Despite challenges identified in recruitment, by December 2021,¹⁶ VILA Hub successfully enrolled its estimated number of 10 participants into the program, all of whom have an ID and essential skills gaps, 7 of which were women, and 9 were youth aged 21-29. Participants received an overview of VILA, job readiness content, and interactive content engagement opportunities.

As of March 2022, a total of 20 participants were enrolled into the VILA program (twice as many as its original estimate of 10) across vocational skills; social media and internet safety; creative expression; and food safety and handling training.¹⁷ From April to June 2022, a further 4 participants from equity-seeking groups were enrolled;¹⁸ with another 3 enrolled from July to October 2022;¹⁹ and another 5 enrolled between October and December 2022 (lower than the originally estimated 12) and finished the full session.²⁰ Overall, there were 10 participants enrolled in 2022–2023 (lower than the originally estimated 15).²¹

It should also be noted that the virtual pilot program (initial pivot of DANI services, which informed the VILA Hub) had accumulated over 9,000 online participation of DANI clients and people on the waitlist within 24 weeks of the virtual program's implementation

Design and Delivery

EQ3: To what extent was the project implemented as planned?

Summary: Although the project made important efforts towards reaching its intended target populations, outreach in underserved communities across Ontario, outside of the GTA, was identified as challenging, and absence of recent documentation limits the assessment of further progress—for instance, whether collaboration with other community agencies and third-party

¹⁵ Q3 Report 2022

¹⁶ Q3 Report 2021

¹⁷ Annual Report 2021-2022

¹⁸ Q1 Report 2022

¹⁹ Q2 Report 2022

²⁰ Q3 Report 2022

²¹ Annual Report 2022-2023

individuals took place and proved effective to meeting this challenge. Nonetheless, participation in the program across all forms of training exceeded original estimates.

Implementation of the VILA Hub

As per the project Work Plan,²² work on the vocational training curriculum was intended to take place in the first half of 2021 (the first year of the project), at which point teachers would also be consulted in order to assess curriculum delivery. Review of the curriculum and modification for province-wide exposure was also intended to take place from January to June 2022. Teachers would also be consulted to assess province-wide curriculum delivery over the course of the year.

By June 2021, the VILA Hub curriculum was created, along with modifiable class plans for the different programs.²³ By September 2021, the VILA Hub platform was implemented using the innovative and interactive Learning Management System Tovuti and continued to be customized. Engaging and interactive vocational training courses and learning activities were created.²⁴ An in-depth intake process, through interviews and questions, also took place towards the goal of implementing an individualized, person-centred approach for each student.

By December 2021, more content had been created within courses in multiple disciplines, including academic development, technical skills, and social engagement.²⁵ Weekly live group classes across two cohorts were also delivered, along with engaging and interactive synchronous learning sessions, one-on-one support classes online, and tutoring sessions for students in need.

By June 2022, the curriculum was further expanded to offer a wider variety of vocational learning opportunities, with DANI reporting that the project achieved “exponential growth of the curriculum which allows VILA to offer a broad range of vocational courses customized to the e-learning environment”.²⁶ Engaging and interactive synchronous learning sessions as well as tutoring sessions for students in need continued to be successfully delivered.

DANI also notes that opportunities for socialization, and the nurturing of friendships were provided, to which “students have been reported looking forward to [these],” though no information is provided on the nature of the opportunities.²⁷

In December 2022, DANI stated that the “multi-discipline interactive curriculum is working well, offering a broad range of topics to learn and diverse methods of teaching, to fit individual preferences and needs.”²⁸

²² Work Plan and Evidence Generation Form

²³ Q1 Report 2021

²⁴ Q2 Report 2021

²⁵ Q3 Report 2021

²⁶ Q1 Report 2022

²⁷ Q1 Report 2022

²⁸ Q3 Report 2022



As of March 2023, DANI states that “after a successful run as a virtual program, the VILA program is now transforming into an in-person program.”²⁹ Although the initial virtual delivery of VILA proved effective in allowing for remote learning during the pandemic, DANI notes that transitioning to an “in-person format will enable participants to receive hands-on training and further enhance their vocational skills.”

Involvement of End-Users

As detailed in the VILA Hub's application for funding, the project was considerably informed by end-user feedback collected through the pilot version of DANI's virtual delivery, which was adapted after COVID-19-related shutdowns. During this initial pilot of online program delivery, DANI "surveyed the participants and their families and were able to both shape the existing pilot program as well as inform the design of the VILA Hub project." Hence, "end-users were instrumental in the design of the VILA Hub."³⁰

Moreover, it was intended that end-users would be critically involved in the implementation of the VILA Hub project through the personalized intake process, in which participants "work closely with the intake team to set individualized goals and work to accommodate special needs," ensuring that ""the VILA Hub is responsive to end users in its implementation."³¹ It was also intended that participants would be surveyed upon the completion of their certificate in order to measure project outcomes.

By June 2021 (first quarter of the project), DANI had conducted a survey with families, caregivers, support workers, staff and clients in order to gather reflections of their experiences with video conferencing platforms online, and identify and understand the accessibility needs of VILA participants.³² The survey identified the most challenging elements of online learning through a video conferencing platform as navigation within the interface of the platform and audio/visual difficulties, and the most successful as the diversity and engagement of the program and its ability to combat social isolation. Thus, criteria were developed upon which to assess the selection of a platform for the VILA Hub. In consultation with the third-party company Future Design School, the Tuovit platform was then selected. Focus groups were then facilitated to test and fine tune the platform to the needs of individuals with various disabilities.

By December 2021, DANI had reviewed the VILA Hub program according to survey feedback from users and instructors. DANI also conducted interviews with each participant to gather in-depth feedback on the advantages and needs of the program and their learning experience.³³

²⁹ Annual Report 2022-2023

³⁰ Application for Innovation Project Funding

³¹ Application for Innovation Project Funding

³² Q1 Report 2021

³³ Q3 Report 2021

Modifications

As reported in VILA's April–June 2021 progress report, DANI decided to upgrade its learning management system (LMS) software "to enhance the online learning experience for users."

VILA's promotional strategy to target underserved communities, accordance with its marketing strategy, was also reassessed in March 2022 as COVID-19 restrictions were being lifted throughout Ontario.³⁴

As of June 2022, DANI reported being "off track" on the progress of the VILA Hub, namely because it was in the process of "re-designing the program into a hybrid model" for Summer 2022 to combat the "zoom exhaustion" and lack of motivation for online learning encountered among community members."³⁵

No further modifications to the project's design or delivery were identified.

EQ4: How was equity, diversity and inclusion considered in the project's design and delivery?

Summary: The project was mostly implemented as planned, delivering social opportunities and extensive course content, live group classes and learning sessions, one-on-one support classes, tutoring sessions through a varied curriculum. Implementation was also significantly informed by feedback collected through DANI's virtual pilot; feedback from families, caregivers, support workers, staff and clients relating to accessibility needs through an initial survey; testing of the VILA Hub platform through focus groups with individuals with ID; and a second round of feedback from users and instructors through a survey and interviews at the end of the first year.

EDI is intrinsic to the rationale of the VILA Hub project itself, as its goal is to serve adults with ID, an important marginalized community who face a number of additional barriers affecting their ability to seek and secure employment and, by extension, general quality of life. As stated in the project application, "community inclusion for people with disabilities is the ultimate focus of all our agency's activities."³⁶ Hence, through the personalised intake process through to the various activities and opportunities offered under the project, the Hub aims to further equity, diversity and inclusion by catering to the needs of people typically marginalized in educational and work settings, and providing them an inclusive space.

Moreover, DANI states that "diversity is a critical focus of the VILA Hub."³⁷ The project also explicitly stated its intent to target additional marginalized groups, including Indigenous peoples, people from rural, remote and northern communities, newcomers, and people without post-

³⁴ Annual Report 2021-2022

³⁵ Q1 Report 2022

³⁶ Application for Innovation Project Funding

³⁷ Application for Innovation Project Funding

secondary education, demonstrating an intersectional focus to the target audience. EDI was also considered in adapting the curriculum "in consultation with organizations serving these specific populations to ensure that the service is both culturally-sensitive and accessible to a diverse group of people."

The Curriculum was also intended to be "culturally sensitive so as to welcome racialized, indigenous and newcomer populations" and to provide a "culturally appropriate approach."

EQ5: Has an annual curriculum review been completed and disseminated appropriately?

Summary: The annual curriculum review was completed in December 2022. However, there is no evidence that learnings were shared and disseminated appropriately and as planned.

As per the project Work Plan³⁸, work on the Annual Curriculum Review was intended to be take place over a two-week period in June 2022 and would be shared online on different special education websites and social media outlets.³⁹ Between October and December 2022, DANI reviewed the curriculum and modified it based on participants' and staff's input, to best fit the participants' needs.⁴⁰ The curriculum was assessed for practical solutions to bridge the skill level gap, and new programs were developed as a result.⁴¹ Although DANI indicated in the July–September 2022 reports that learnings from the process would be shared “with the DANI community of supporters, leaders, families and followers via social media,”⁴² the latest reporting does not indicate whether this was done.

Effectiveness

EQ6: To what extent did/does the project meet its intended outcomes?

Summary: As of December 2022, the project has met most of its intended outcomes. An accessible learning environment was provided, facilitated through end-user involvement as described above. By the end of the project's first year, VILA Hub also fostered a supportive network for people with disabilities and their families which, as a result, also helped successfully mitigate the effects of social isolation created by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, although the project has been found to enhance vocational skills for people with disabilities, lack of documentation prevents the assessment of progress towards participants' confidence, independence, social engagement, and

³⁸ DANI Work Plan

³⁹ Q1 Report 2022

⁴⁰ Q3 Report 2022

⁴¹ Q3 Report 2022

⁴² Q2 Report 2022

job readiness. Nonetheless, initial findings show that the program has led to improved career decision-making on in-demand skills, improved career-decision making, acquisition of technical and other work-related skills, and an increase in social skills and group learning ethics.

Creation of an accessible learning environment

This outcome was met by December 2021 (Q3 of Y1). As previously stated, preliminary research with the DANI community (i.e., parents) was undertaken so as to identify accessibility needs and develop criteria to assess platform based on these needs.⁴³ Following this, the online Tovuti system was chosen in consultation with the third-party company Future Design School as the platform to host the VILA Hub as it was identified as the most relevant, effective and accessible Learning Management System available.⁴⁴ The platform was customized to accessibility features based on feedback obtained through focus groups with individuals with ID, and content was modified accordingly. Staff also received training specific to the platform’s accessibility features⁴⁵ and completed an EDI training program.⁴⁶

Enhancing vocational skills for people with disabilities

In its December 2022 quarterly report, DANI stated that “VILA enhanced participants' theoretical knowledge of vocational occupations, professional conduct, and skills necessary for integration in a workplace.”⁴⁷

By March 2022, DANI reported that 10 project participants had reported that the knowledge acquired through the VILA Hub has led to improved career decision making, 20 participants had reported that the knowledge acquired for improved decision-making on current and emerging in-demand skills, and 6 reported greater awareness of where to access career development information, advice, and guidance.⁴⁸ 20 also reported “an increase in social skills and group learning ethics, acquisition of new knowledge of skills pertaining to navigation of and conduct in a work environment, and an increase in technical skills.”⁴⁹

Although, as mentioned, this outcome appears to have been partially met as of December 2022, its assessment is limited as progress reports have not assessed progress towards the outcome through Quality of Life indicators (i.e., confidence, personal independence, social engagement, job readiness) as reported by the individual and their support network, a completion rate for all certificates (75% target), and the number of participants who earned a Vocational Achievement Certificate and produced a resume supplemented by their VILA experience.

⁴³ Q1 Report 2022

⁴⁴ Q1 Report 2022

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Q3 Report 2022

⁴⁷ Q3 Report 2022

⁴⁸ Annual Report 2021-2022

⁴⁹ Annual Report 2021-2022

Fostering a supportive network for people with disabilities and their families

By September 2021 (Q2 of Y1), DANI stated that this outcome had been met, noting that it had “[fostered] opportunities to increase social engagement, nurture personal independence and promote confidence to increase quality of life,” but that the work would be ongoing over the duration of the project.⁵⁰ DANI’s 2022 Q1 and Q2 reports reiterate the meeting of this outcome and add that the “VILA team believes in creating strong and meaningful bonds with the students and their families and support circles and aim to provide support and serve as a resource beyond the scope of VILA learning.”⁵¹ Moreover, the report states that “VILA successfully helps mitigate the effects of social isolation created by COVID” as a result of the socialization opportunities offered by the platform, to which “students have been reported looking forward” to.⁵²

In its latest report (December 2022), VILA was described as a “pathway from isolation to connection and community to registered families and participants,” which has also led some VILA participants to extend their participation to other DANI programs or community resources.⁵³

Project Learnings

Over the course of the design and implementation of VILA Hub, DANI identified a number of project learnings, as follows:

- According to a survey completed by DANI families, caregivers, support workers, staff and clients, “navigation within the interface” of **video conferencing platforms** and “audio/visual difficulties” constitute “the most challenging elements of inline learning experience,” with “the diversity and engagement of the program and its ability to combat social isolation” being the most successful components.⁵⁴
- In order to implement **effective and technologically accessible platforms for clients with special needs**, “the practical foundation for the project should be configured, tested and modified accordingly,” and a **marketing** team is essential to furthering the project,⁵⁵ in particular for recruitment and outreach.⁵⁶ Additionally, “[establishing] community partnerships with relevant organizations that would be able and willing to collaborate in promoting services” is an important consideration.⁵⁷ Furthermore, “marketing has to appeal to both the end user, secondary user, and the PWD's support system.”⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Q2 Report 2021

⁵¹ Q1 Report 2022

⁵² Q1 Report 2022

⁵³ Q3 Report 2022

⁵⁴ Q1 Report 2021

⁵⁵ Q2 Report 2021

⁵⁶ Q3 Report 2021

⁵⁷ Q3 Report 2021

⁵⁸ Q3 Report 2022

- Ensuring **objectives** are “clearly defined and understood from the outset” is an important learning for any FSC project teams with similar objectives, which “will allow all members of the team to be fully cognizant of what the outcomes of the project should be and reduce confusion” as well as “ensure that the participants of the projects are receiving the maximum benefits of what the project is offering.”⁵⁹ Intake and recruitment should also be included and budgeted for, particularly for social services organizations.⁶⁰
- **Accessibility and interactive content** need to be continuously modified and updated, participants require “basic technical knowledge and basic navigation skills” to use online learning platforms, and material should also include practical implementation solutions.⁶¹
- The “development of **collaborations with potential clientele and third-party targets** (e.g., family members, support workers, like-minded organizations)” is a time-consuming process, and must be preceded by a “preliminary shift in perception and awareness” regarding the potential of online learning.⁶²
- Although online learning proved effective during the pandemic, it is since becoming less relevant. Therefore, “projects with similar objectives should create an **in-person training** program, instead of an online one, during this age, as well as create solutions for work placements prior to creating a learning curriculum for this specific population.”⁶³ A hybrid model could also be considered, which would allow participants to “receive a hands-on in person experience physically practicing the learned skills.”⁶⁴
- Forming “**community partnerships with employers**” is an essential consideration prior to the implementation of a vocational training program to ensure that online vocational learning is “tied into real-life work opportunities”⁶⁵ and to ensure “program continuity and enable students to apply their learnings in real-world settings.”⁶⁶

⁵⁹ Q2 Report 2021

⁶⁰ Q2 Report 2021

⁶¹ Q3 Report 2021

⁶² Q2 Report 2022

⁶³ Q2 Report 2022

⁶⁴ Q3 Report 2022

⁶⁵ Q3 Report 2022

⁶⁶ Annual Report 2022-2023



4.0 Conclusions

By establishing a virtual hub offering extensive, culturally appropriate and person-centred skills teaching and social opportunities, the VILA Hub initiative addresses the needs of adults with ID relating to vocational training and social engagement whilst circumventing accessibility barriers to training. These needs were heightened with the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated social isolation and accessibility issues; VILA Hub was the result of the almost immediate pivoting to virtual service delivery, which early feedback showed DANI clients found highly receptive to their needs.

Although the project made important efforts towards reaching its intended target populations, outreach in underserved communities across Ontario, outside of the GTA, was identified as challenging, and absence of recent documentation limits the assessment of further progress—for instance, whether collaboration with other community agencies and third-party individuals took place and proved effective to meeting this challenge. Nonetheless, participation in the program across all forms of training exceeded original estimates.

The project was also mostly implemented as planned, delivering social opportunities and extensive course content, live group classes and learning sessions, one-on-one support classes, tutoring sessions through a varied curriculum. Implementation was also significantly informed by feedback collected through DANI's virtual pilot; feedback from families, caregivers, support workers, staff and clients relating to accessibility needs through an initial survey; testing of the VILA Hub platform through focus groups with individuals with ID; and a second round of feedback from users and instructors through a survey and interviews at the end of the first year. The annual curriculum review was completed in December 2022. However, there is no evidence that learnings were shared and disseminated appropriately and as planned.

Finally, as of December 2022, the project has met most of its intended outcomes. An accessible learning environment was provided, facilitated through end-user involvement as described above. By the end of the project's first year, VILA Hub also fostered a supportive network for people with disabilities and their families which, as a result, also helped successfully mitigate the effects of social isolation created by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, although the project has been found to enhance vocational skills for people with disabilities, lack of documentation prevents the assessment of progress towards participants' confidence, independence, social engagement, and job readiness. Nonetheless, initial findings show that the program has led to improved career decision-making on in-demand skills, improved career-decision making, acquisition of technical and other work-related skills, and an increase in social skills and group learning ethics.