



Project Insights Report

Virtual Inclusive Learning Academy



PARTNERS

Developing And Nurturing Independence



LOCATIONS

Ontario



INVESTMENT

\$428,000



PUBLISHED

February 2025



CONTRIBUTORS

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Executive Summary

Intellectual disability affects up to 3% of the population. Adults with intellectual disabilities experience high rates of unemployment, social isolation and poverty. Adults with intellectual disabilities face multiple barriers in accessing programs and services to support them in the labour market. To address this, Developing and Nurturing Independence (DANI) created the Virtual Learning Academy (VILA), an online vocational training and social engagement hub. VILA launched in March 2021.

Using a person-centred and culturally appropriate approach, the VILA hub aimed to provide life skills, academic and job training, engagement, and work opportunities to adults with intellectual disabilities across diverse communities in Ontario. The program’s aim was to increase employment readiness and job seeking skills, create connections among peers, build relationships and help to counteract social isolation and poverty.

The pilot program was tested with 32 participants, who enrolled between March 2021 and December 2022. Overall, participants noted that the platform was accessible and relevant for their needs and helped to improve job-related skills, such as career decision-making, social skills and ability to navigate a work environment.

This project is relevant to service providers who work with adults with intellectual disabilities, and are already providing or considering providing virtual programs and services, especially employment readiness and vocational training.

KEY INSIGHTS



The majority of participants reported an increase in social skills, group learning ethics, technical skills and ability to navigate a work environment.

2

The VILA hub was able to increase social engagement and nurture independence and confidence by creating strong bonds with the students, families and support circles through the online platform and social engagement opportunities.

3

Effective virtual programming for adults with intellectual disabilities requires thoughtful curriculum development, careful selection of a technology partner and platform, and input from users to inform design.

▶ The Issue

Intellectual disability (meaning one or more limitations in cognitive functioning and skills, including communication, social and self-care skills) affects between 1% and 3% of the population.

Adults with intellectual disabilities face significant challenges when entering the workforce and can experience high rates of unemployment, social isolation and poverty. A limited number of services exist to meet the needs of adults with intellectual disabilities for social engagement, literacy and lifelong learning. Financial, geographic and social barriers also keep these individuals from exploring and expanding their skills, which would help them obtain and maintain employment.

The COVID-19 pandemic was especially difficult for those with intellectual disabilities. They were more physically vulnerable, but they also suffered emotionally from the social isolation and disruption of daily routines. Adults with intellectual disabilities had even less access to the programs and services they needed than they had before.



What We Investigated

To address these barriers, DANI launched VILA in March 2021. VILA acts as DANI's virtual campus and is a virtual vocational training and social hub offering courses that provide life skills, academic and job training, engagement, and work opportunities to adults with intellectual disabilities. The objectives of VILA were to increase employment readiness and job seeking skills, create connections among peers, build relationships and help to counteract social isolation and poverty.

A DANI staff member conducts a personal intake with each potential user to support them to choose the right social engagement, employment and skills development training for them. The virtual courses focus on skills that are not widely available to those with intellectual disabilities, such as professionalism in the workplace, resume writing and job interviewing skills. DANI staff developed the curriculum and modifiable class plans.

VILA also allows participants to develop a supportive network to support relationship building, increased self-acceptance and reduced social isolation. Weekly live group classes were delivered across two cohorts, along with engaging and interactive synchronous learning sessions; online, one-on-one support classes; and tutoring sessions for students in need.

What We're Learning

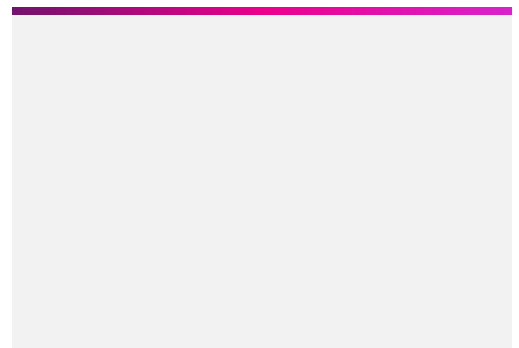
The program was tested with 32 participants who enrolled between March 2021 and December 2022. After participating, more than 60% of participants reported an increase in social skills and group learning ethics, new skills pertaining to navigating and conducting themselves in a work environment, and technical skills. One-third of project participants reported that the knowledge gained through the VILA hub helped improve their career decision-making, and two-thirds reported that the VILA hub helped them improve decision-making on current and emerging in-demand skills.

The initial pilot results suggest that the VILA hub holds promise for fostering a supportive network for people with intellectual disabilities. Participants reported increased social engagement, more independence and greater confidence. However, due to the lack of comparison groups in the evaluation design, we cannot determine to what extent these reported changes are due to the program intervention.

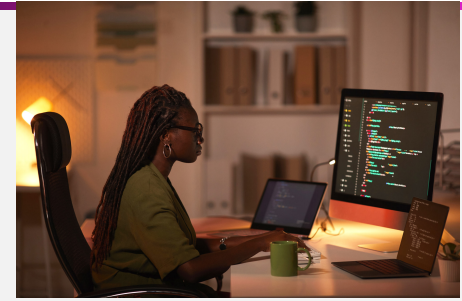
Through testing and participant feedback, the platform and curriculum were adjusted to best serve clients. Overall, participants noted that the platform was accessible and relevant to their needs.

Why It Matters

Individuals living with intellectual disabilities face many barriers and challenges related to learning and expanding their skills. The learnings from this project are relevant to service providers working with adults with intellectual disabilities, and who are already providing or considering providing virtual programs and services, especially employment readiness and vocational training.



This project showcases what it takes to provide effective virtual programming for adults with intellectual disabilities, including selecting and developing the curriculum, choosing which technology partner will provide the platform, and conducting user testing to improve the experience.



State of Skills: Digital Tools in the Skills Ecosystem

There is considerable promise in the role digital tools and virtual career services can play in improving access to training and career development, particularly for those with geographic barriers or constraints such as family care or other work responsibilities.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

► **What's Next**

After the restrictions on in-person services were lifted, DANI redesigned the VILA program model to include a mix of virtual and in-person services to combat the Zoom exhaustion and lack of motivation for online learning encountered among community members. DANI continues to use the VILA platform as a key service offering for its clients.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

Funded by the
Government of Canada's
Future Skills Program

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Virtual Inclusive Learning Academy is funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program. The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

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