Ve'ahavta

Evaluation of Impacts of Digital Access and literacy for BFW & VSA Program Participants

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Background

Due to COVID-19, Building Foundations for Women (BFW) and Ve'ahavta Skills Academy (VSA) programs moved the programs online.

Participants were provided digital equipment and data plans to facilitate online participation and were able to keep them after the classes ended.[1]

The curriculum was similar to the in-class sessions. Participants gained hands-on digital training as they participated in the online sessions, but the program did not include formal digital literacy training.

Wanting to gain greater insights into the strategic implications of the online programming, Ve'ahavta conducted an evaluation of the online sessions to better understand its impacts.

Informed by a literature review (see highlights in Appendix 1), in September 2020, an online survey was sent to all spring and summer graduates of both programs. The full survey is attached in Appendix 2

The Digital Divide

"It is difficult to underestimate the importance of the Internet in society today; it has revolutionized the social, political, and economic environment in which we live (Cooper, 2010) by providing an increasingly central platform for communication, gathering and disseminating information, entertainment, and education".

Source: Poverty, Literacy, and Social Transformation: An Interdisciplinary Exploration of the Digital Divide (2018)

"39% of Ontarians with the lowest incomes (compared to only 1% with the highest incomes) are unable to gain the knowledge and consumer benefits as well as the social and personal benefits typically associated with seamless internet access. Limited access also prevents people from fully participating and voicing their views and opinions".

Source: AlphaPlus: the Impacts of Ontario's digital divide (2020)

[1] Spring session participants received smartphones and summer sessions participants received Chromebooks

Participant Profile

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Survey Respondents

28 students participated in the survey with the majority (79%) from the summer sessions (with Chromebooks).

28 Survey respondents

48% Response rate

Training Programs

Participants from both programs were represented fairly equally, though almost all (86%) respondents were female.

60% BFW

40% VSA

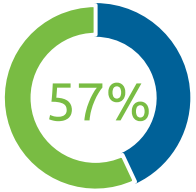
Housing

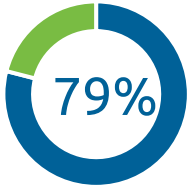
While taking the course, participants' housing situation varied.

Own apartment or house	40%
Living with family/friends	30%
Shelter	30%

Digital Access Prior to the program

More than half did not own a personal digital device before the program.





The majority had access to the internet

Impact on quality of life and mental health

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All participants agreed that "life is better" and that their mental health improved since getting their devices and participating in the program.

Participants saw positive changes in their lives[1] (see slide 10 for detailed results):

86%
Open to new experiences

82%
Preparedness for further online training

79%
Ability to manage household responsibilities

79%
Health and wellbeing

79%
Self-esteem and self-confidence

79%
Skills and employability

75%
Social relationships with family and friends

61%
Finances

"I'm employed! I have more resources, more connections, more financial stability, more confidence, more hope, and a sense of direction."

"I have no need to worry about how to get myself a device to help me communicate and search for things that would improve my life in Canada."

"Decreased anxiety and fear for learning digital skills."

"I'm no longer lonely as I talk to loved ones using the device."

- Participant Survey comments

[1] Top 2 box score Some/Significant Change

Q: Since getting a digital device and being connected to the Internet, to what extent have you seen a change in any of the following

Digital Activity

Digital usage increased across a range of typical online activities. The largest increase was in booking appointments (82% increase) and helping friends or family access use the internet (67% increase). The average increase was 32% change). See slide 11 for detailed results.

Since taking the program and having digital access, participants are doing the following activities:

Socializing with/ connecting with friends and family — 93%

Finding health information or other support services information — 82%

Banking — 79%

Accessing government resources/services — 79%

Searching for/applying for jobs — 79%

Accessing learning materials — 79%

"I am able to do more research, fill out forms that android phone do not support."

"Trying to find more online support groups."

"I am able to do more than I could on my android phone, and I feel accomplished."

"Having access to more information."

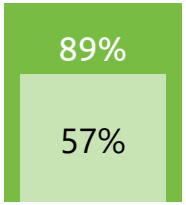
"Better connections to more possibilities"

- Participant Survey comments

The only area that had not changed was shopping online (46%)

Digital Literacy

Digital literacy improved. While participants did not receive formal literacy training, hands-on practice during the program enabled participants to gain new skills and confidence navigating online environment. Most are now more comfortable with a range of online activities. However, more training would be beneficial for certain online activities



89% felt their computer/digital skills improved, with 57% significantly improved

Almost all (96%) would be interested in taking future courses online

Learned to do virtual meetings by ZOOM, presentations, WhatsApp, Google drive.

"I have registered for some online courses."

"I joined a writer's group via zoom."

- Participant Survey comments

Areas for additional digital training and support (Participant least comfortable digital activities)

50% Shopping online

54% Booking appointments

54% Helping children with schoolwork

57% Finding health information or other support services

57% Accessing learning materials

What more could Ve'ahavta provide?

- How to use software programs
- Weekly exercises/worksheets that help develop digital skills
- Pairing with someone that can answer questions and help develop skills

Conclusions

Moving the programs online, enhanced and expanded the impacts of the program beyond the in-class design. By providing digital access, participants' quality of life and mental health improved, social isolation reduced, and they gained digital skills and confidence to become more comfortable, confident and active online learners. Digital literacy was gained out of necessity rather than formal training. This practical approach to adult learning, enabled participants to gain added skills and benefits that have led to positive changes in their lives. This unintended outcome may have the most lasting positive impact for participants as they continue to build their lives and future plans.

Reduced Digital Divide

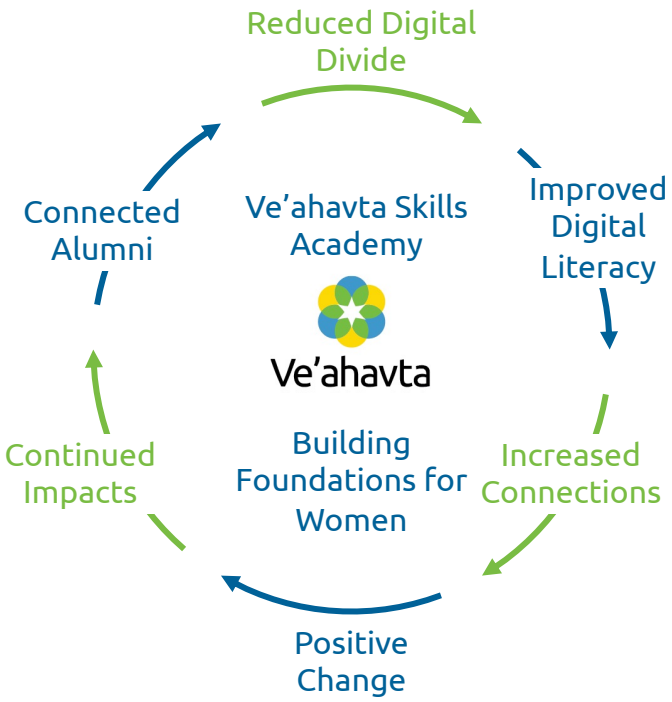
By providing digital access, participants now have the ability to explore and use the internet as part of their daily lives

Improved Digital Literacy

The online sessions required participants to navigate the digital environment to participate. While not an intended outcome, participants digital literacy and problem solving skills improved

Increased Connections

The online format provided more ways for participants to become connected/less alone (critical during COVID-19).



Positive Change

Participants saw positive changes in their lives. Quality of life and mental health and wellness improved.

Continued Impacts

With greater self-confidence, there is more interest in continued online learning and using the internet to build their lives and plans. Being able to keep their devices, these positive impacts should continue beyond participants' time with Ve'ahavta programs.

Connected Alumni

Ve'ahavta now has greater opportunities to maintain communication and contact with alumni post-program.

Recommendations

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Maintain Virtual Program Design

Continue to offer the program virtually and provide participants with Chromebooks that they can keep.

The virtual program provides greater opportunities and flexibility for the future program design and delivery

- ☑ Develop online curriculum library (LMS)
- ☑ Expanded geography beyond GTA
- ☑ New specialized cohorts (e.g. youth, newcomers, etc.)
- ☑ Women in shelters

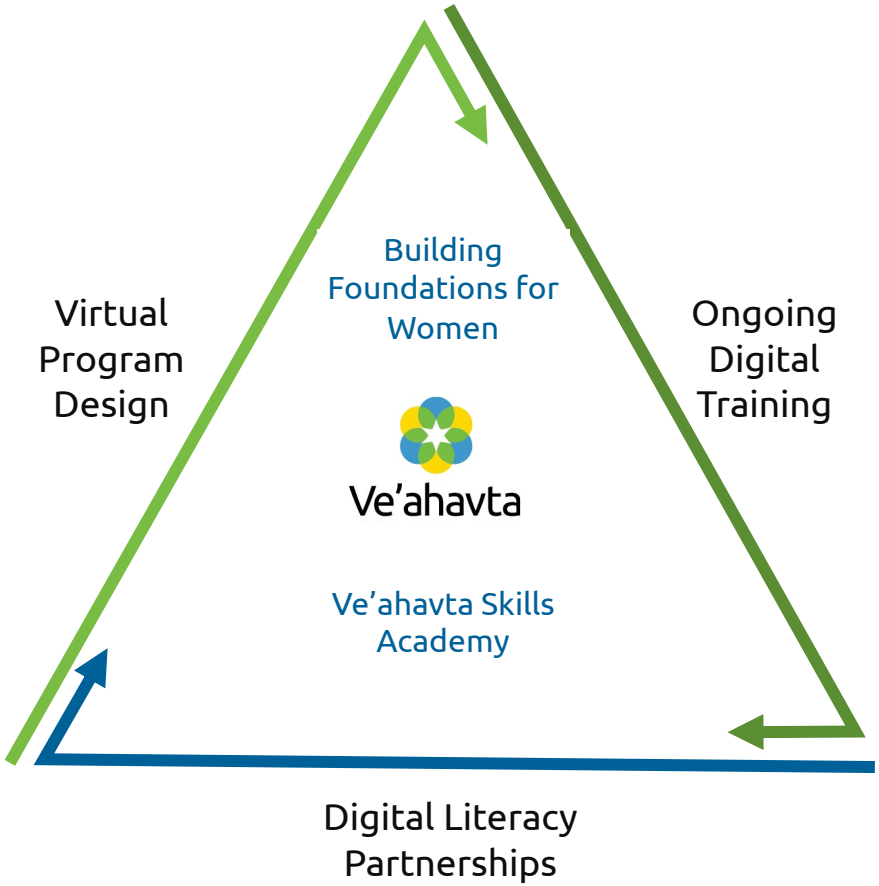
Provide Ongoing Digital Training

Seek opportunities to provide ongoing digital activities and training through Bridge and alumni programming to continue to build participant's skills and confidence. This could also be volunteer activity.

Partnerships with Digital Literacy Organizations

Explore partnerships with literacy focused organizations such as Frontier College and AlphaPlus

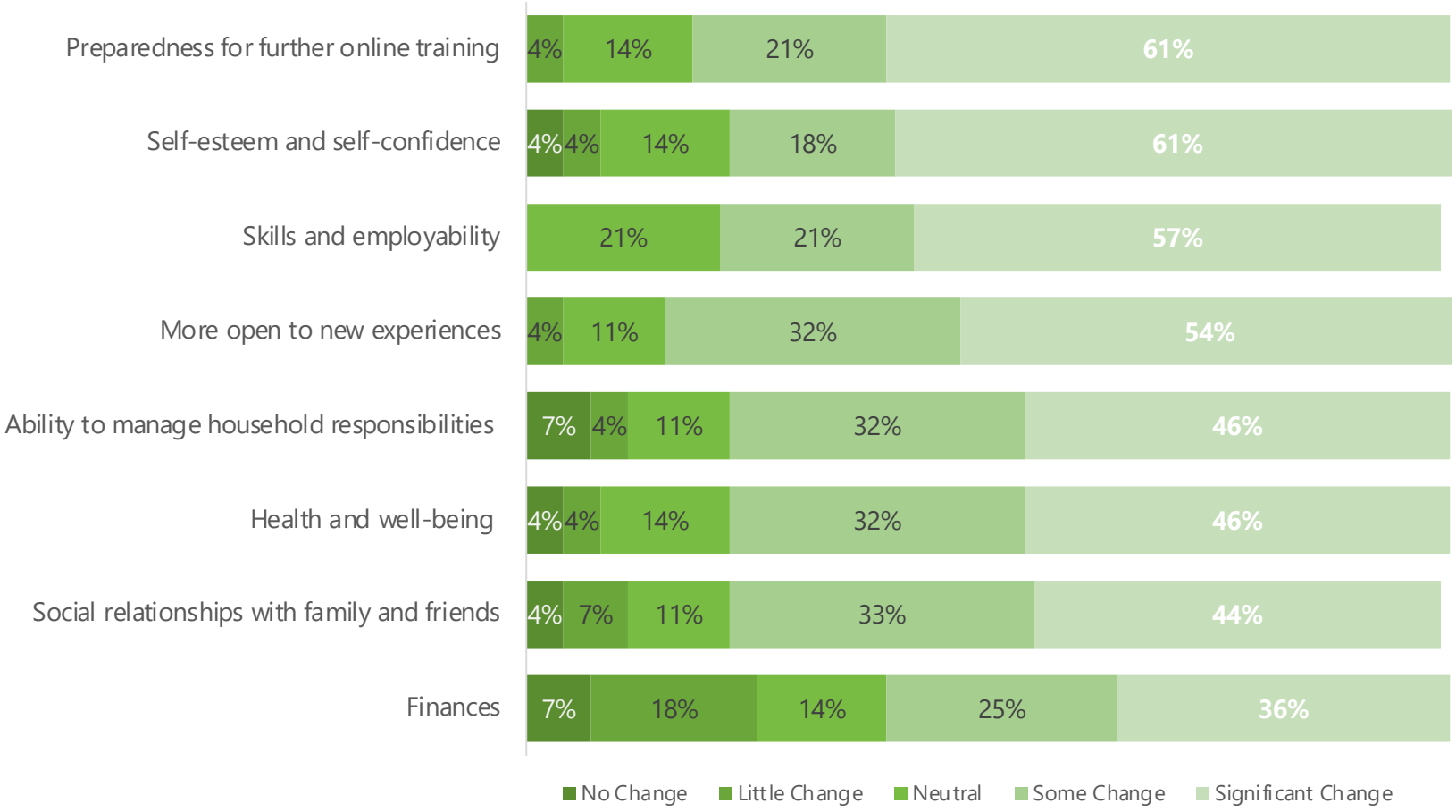
- Resources for curriculum/activities
- Partner programming



Detailed Survey Findings

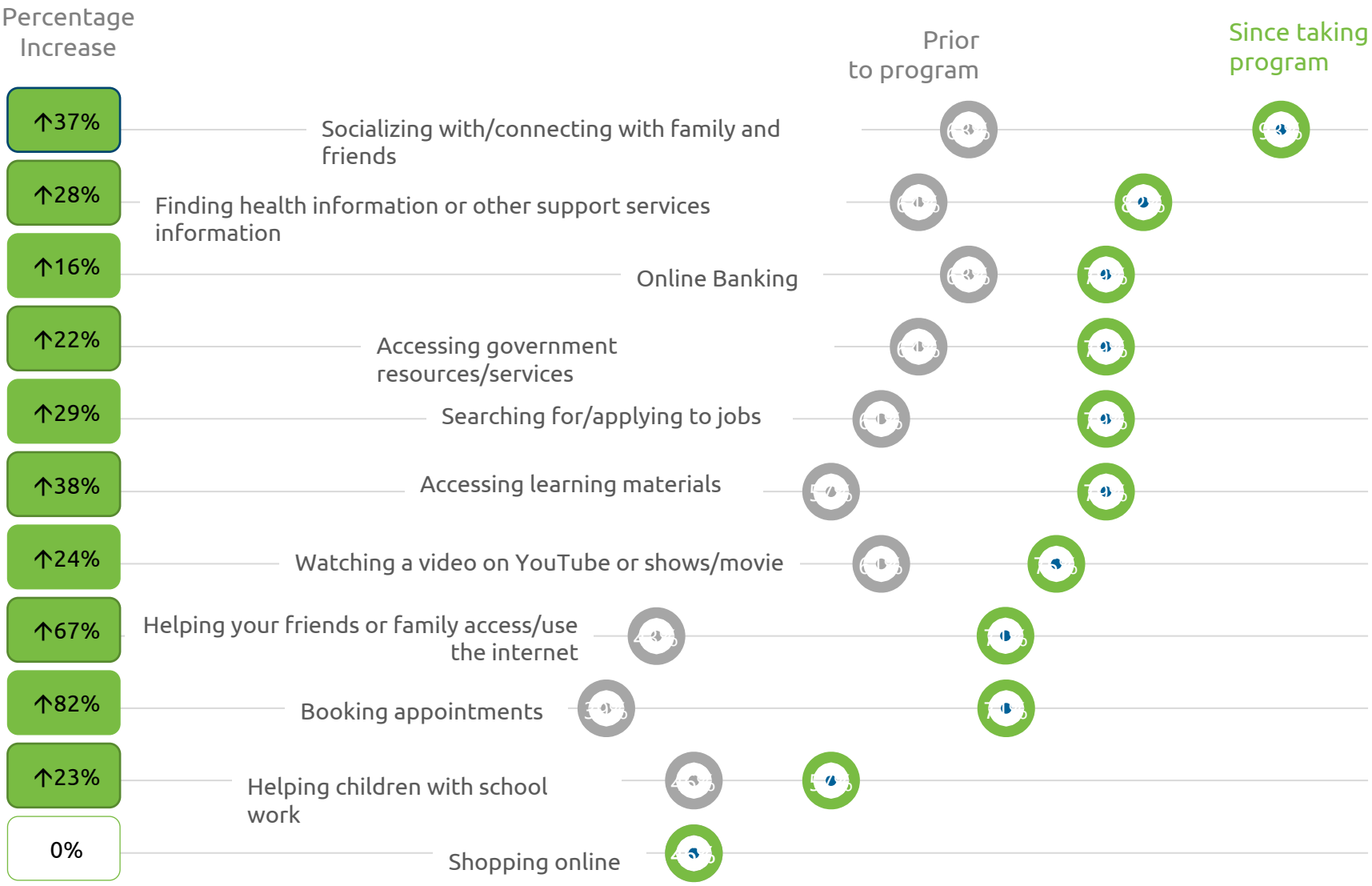
Impact: Life Skills and Wellbeing

Changes in Life Skills & Wellbeing



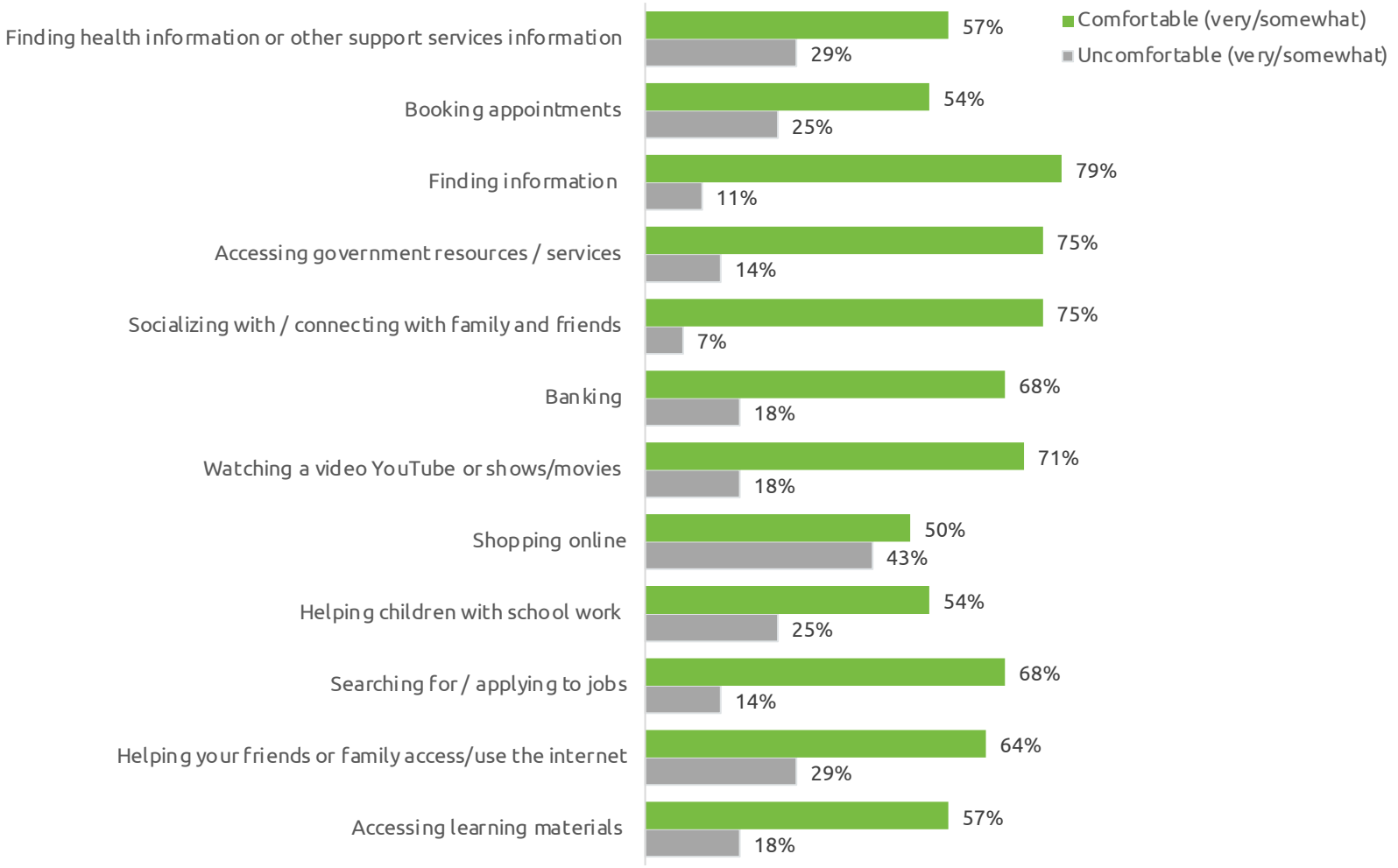
Q: Since getting a digital device and being connected to the Internet, to what extent have you seen a change in any of the following?

Impact: Increased Online Activities



Q. What activities did you do online before attending VSA or BFW? Q. Since taking VSA or BFW online, have you engaged in any of the activities?

Impact: Comfort with online activities



Q. What is your comfort level with each activity?

Appendix 1

Appendix 1: Highlights of Literature Review

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Addressing the Digital Divide

- Digital divide is defined as "the socioeconomic and other disparities between those people who have opportunities and skills enabling them to benefit from digital resources, especially the internet, and those who do not have these opportunities or skills". Dictionary.com

- It is difficult to underestimate the importance of the Internet in society today; it has revolutionized the social, political, and economic environment in which we live (Cooper, 2010) by providing an increasingly central platform for communication, gathering and disseminating information, entertainment, and education. Poverty, Literacy, and Social Transformation: An Interdisciplinary Exploration of the Digital Divide (2018)

- "39% of Ontarians with the lowest incomes (compared to only 1% with the highest incomes) are unable to gain the knowledge and consumer benefits as well as the social and personal benefits typically associated with seamless internet access. Limited access also prevents people from fully participating and voicing their views and opinions". AlphaPlus: the Impacts of Ontario's digital divide (2020)

- COVID-19 has made the impacts of the digital divide more striking and the value and impact of providing digital access more critical. "These efforts are lifesaving, they make physical distancing and social isolation possible, and they bring into sharp relief the ways in which community-based educators compensate for equity gaps in health, education and government services". Policynote: Digital equity and community solidarity during and after COVID-19 (April 2020)

Appendix 1: Highlights of Literature Review

Digital Access not enough –Digital Literacy Training is needed as well

- "Providing better access is one thing; giving people the tools and resources they need to become digitally literate (and safe online) is another issue altogether." Canadian Internet Registration Authority The gap between us: Perspectives on building a better online Canada (2018)

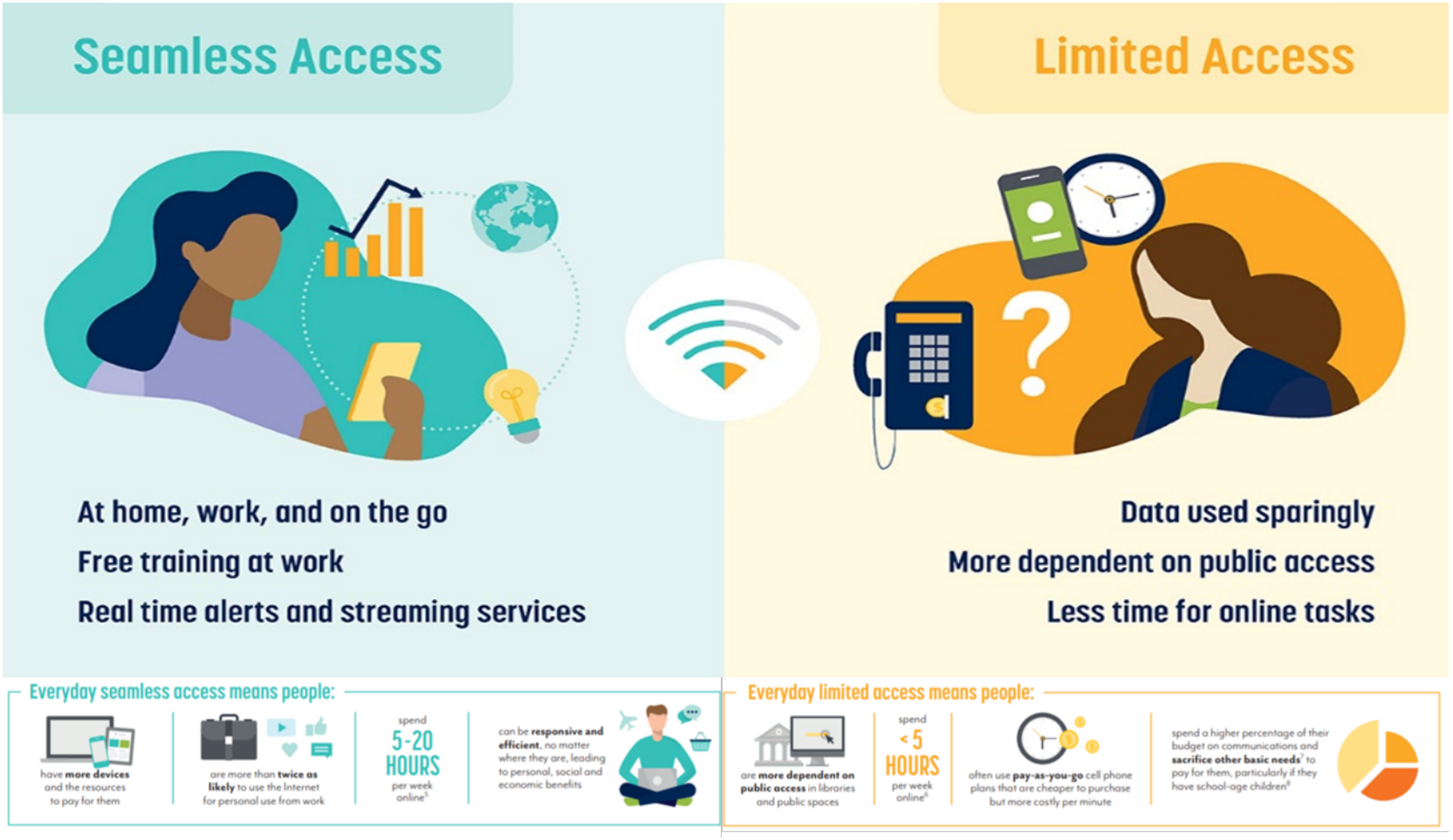
- "Acorn survey revealed that many low and moderate income respondents lack the necessary skills to use the internet effectively. Over 28 percent of survey respondents indicated that they had been unable to complete a task online because they didn't have the skills. More than half of respondents reported having difficulty completing tasks online. Around 1 in 5 had issues searching for health information online, with the same number reporting that they have had issues filing taxes online". Acorn Canada: Barriers to Digital Equity in Canada (2019)

Alignment of Ve'ahavta's Program Outcomes with Literacy Skills Programs Outcomes

- "Literacy and Essential Skills programs have the potential to transform individuals' lives across a number of dimensions, including in their level of skill, knowledge, and abilities; their self-esteem and self-confidence, their health and social relationships, their ability to manage their household responsibilities and their finances, their performance in the labour market, or their participation in postsecondary education". Frontier College: Literacy and Essential Skills as a Poverty Reduction Strategy. National Research Report (2019)

- "Broadening our understanding of success in the context of literacy programming requires looking at changes in a learner's health and well-being, including improvements in their quality of life and in their mental health". Frontier College: Literacy and Essential Skills as a Poverty Reduction Strategy. National Research Report (2019)

Appendix 1: Highlights of Digital Access/Literacy Literature Review



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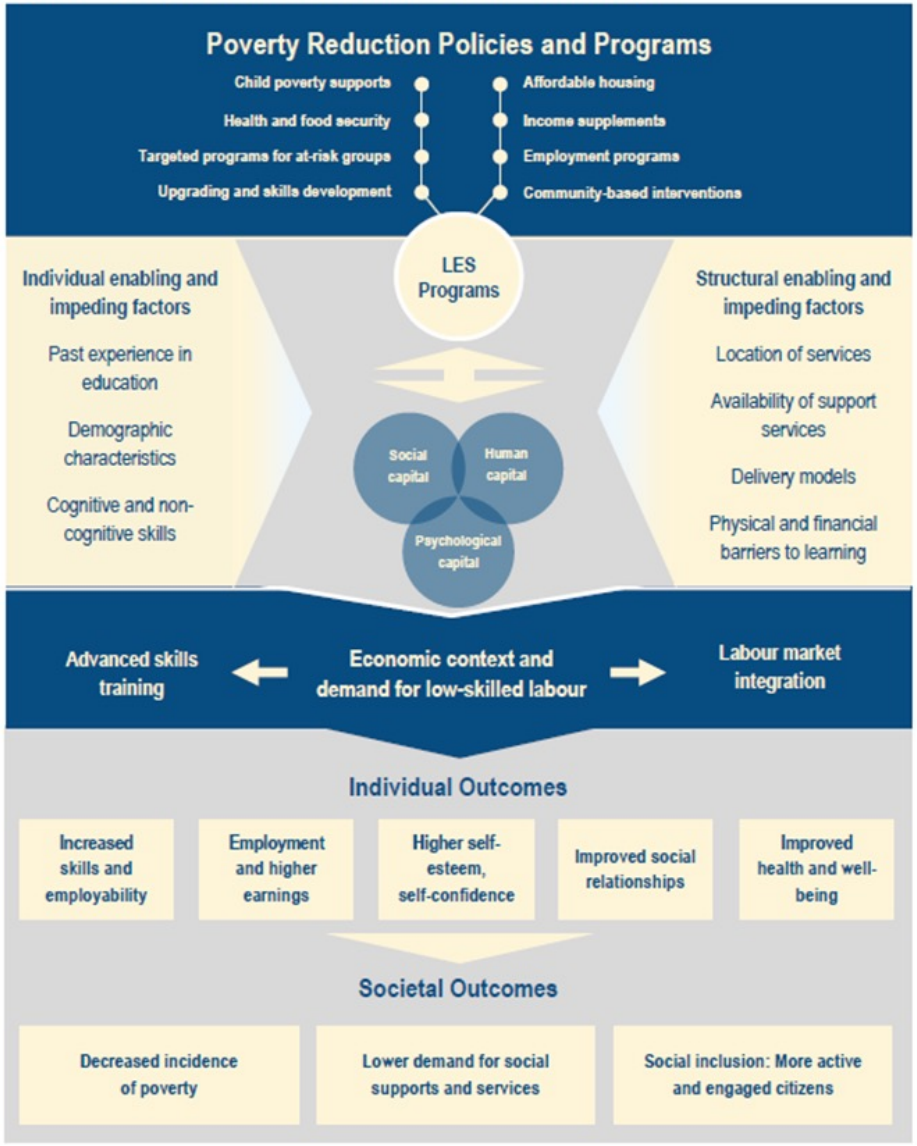
AlphaPlus: Digital Divide

Appendix 1: Highlights of Digital Access/Literacy Literature Review



Frontier College: Theoretical Framework for literacy and essential skills programs

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Appendix 2

Appendix 2: Survey Questions

Due to COVID-19, Ve'ahavta adjusted the delivery of the Ve'ahavta Skills Academy and Building Foundations for Women classroom sessions to online. Each of you were provided with a digital device and data to allow you to participate in the training sessions online. As this is a new way of offering its programs, Ve'ahavta would like to hear from you about your experiences with using digital devices and the Internet.

Due to COVID-19, Ve'ahavta adjusted the delivery of the Ve'ahavta Skills Academy and Building Foundations for Women classroom sessions to online. Each of you were provided with a digital device and data to allow you to participate in the training sessions online. As this is a new way of offering its programs, Ve'ahavta would like to hear from you about your experiences with using digital devices and the Internet.

1. Which Ve'ahavta session did you participate in?
   - ☐ BFW - Winter session Feb 2020
   - ☐ BFW - Summer session June 2020
   - ☐ VSA - Winter session Feb 2020
   - ☐ VSA - Summer session July 2020
2. What is your age (please select a range):
   - ☐ 18-29
   - ☐ 30-39
   - ☐ 40-49
   - ☐ 50+
3. Where did you live while you were taking BFW or VSA?
   - ☐ with family/friends
   - ☐ at a shelter
   - ☐ your own apartment / home
   - ☐ other
4. What gender do you identify as? Check ONE only.
   - ☐ Female
   - ☐ Male
   - ☐ Trans (Female to male)
   - ☐ Trans (Male to female)
   - ☐ Intersex
   - ☐ Prefer not to answer
   - ☐ Other

4. Before taking VSA or BFW online, did you have your own personal device where you lived? ◯ Yes ◯ No
5. Before taking VSA or BFW online, did you have access to the internet where you lived? ◯ Yes ◯ No
6. If you had a device before VSA or BFW, what type of device was it?
7. Before taking VSA or BFW online, had you taken a course online? ◯ Yes ◯ No
8. What activities did you do online BEFORE attending VSA or BFW? (select all that apply) *

Appendix 2: Survey Questions

Activities	What activities did you do online before attending VSA or BFW?	Since taking VSA or BFW online, have you engaged in any of the activities?	What is your comfort level with each activity (1 = 'not comfortable at all'; 5 = 'very comfortable')
Accessing learning materials	◯ Yes No	◯ Yes No	
Helping your friends or family access/use the internet	◯ Yes No		
Searching for / applying to jobs	◯ Yes No	◯ Yes No	
Helping children with school work (if applicable)	◯ Yes No		
Shopping online	◯ Yes No	◯ Yes No	
Watching a video YouTube or shows/movies online	◯ Yes No	◯ Yes No	
Banking online	◯ Yes No	◯ Yes No	
Socializing with / connecting with family and friends through e.g., Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp etc.	◯ Yes No	◯ Yes No	
Accessing government resources / services	◯ Yes No	◯ Yes No	
Finding information online	◯ Yes No	◯ Yes No	
Booking appointments online	◯ Yes No	◯ Yes No	
Finding health information or other support services information online	◯ Yes No	◯ Yes No	
Other: (please describe)	◯ Yes No	◯ Yes No	

Appendix 2: Survey Questions

9. Since getting a digital device from Ve'ahavta, have your computer/digital skills improved? [a scale will be provided – '1' (no improvement) to '5' (significant improvement)]

10. Since getting a digital device and being connected to the Internet, to what extent have you seen a change in any of the following. ('1' = no change' to '5' = 'significant change') Your….
    - ☐ self-esteem and self-confidence
    - ☐ health and well-being
    - ☐ social relationships with family and friends
    - ☐ ability to manage household responsibilities
    - ☐ skills and employability
    - ☐ your finances
    - ☐ preparedness for further online training
    - ☐ more open to new experiences
    - ☐ Other: __please describe_____

11. Since taking this course, are you now more interested in taking other courses online in the future? ('1' = not interested to '5'= very interested Please explain:

12. Since taking VSA or BFW, overall, my life is better. ◯ Yes ◯ No
    Please explain:

13. Has your mental health improved since getting the device? ◯ Yes ◯ No
    Please explain:

14. To continue to build your digital skills, which of the following would you be interested in (check all that apply)
    - ☐ Further training on how to use your device
    - ☐ Training on how to use software programs
    - ☐ Training on how to search the internet
    - ☐ More opportunities to practice
    - ☐ Pairing you up with someone that can answer your questions and help develop your skills
    - ☐ Weekly exercises/worksheets that help you develop your digital skills
    - ☐ Other: _____

15. Was retrieving the device from Ve'ahavta easy? ◯ Yes ◯ No Please explain:

16. Was it easy to work with Ve'ahavta to set up your Internet access? ◯ Yes ◯ No Please explain: