# Character Strengths in CamEd Students and Their Implications

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze ad compare common character strengths in first and fourth year CamEd students and discusses interventions for growing strengths in CamEd students using this data. The VIA-IS 120 was used to measure strength profiles. Common reported character strengths in the total population are: Honesty, Kindness, Fairness, Teamwork & Leadership, which are different from common reported characer strengths in the total South East Asian population. Furthermore only the strength Humility shows a significant difference between both years, with higher reports in year 1. Interventions can be targeted on growing Hope and Gratitude and can be implemented in existing courses giving at CamEd. The findings show a need for further research on character strengths in Cambodian students, using a bigger population ranging from different educational providers in order to develop tailor made interventions which improve mental well-being and academic achievement in Cambodian students.

**Key words: Character Strengths, Positive Psychology, Students**

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# Introduction

Psychological distress in students is a growing concern for higher education institutes. Research done among students world wide are showing rates of psychological distress ranging from 78% in the United Kingdom (National Union of Students, 2013), to 67.4% in Australia (Kessler et. al., 2003), 56% in Malaysia (Salam et. Al., 2013), 53% in United States (Mosley et. al., 2008) and and 30% in Canada (Adlaf et. al., 2007). These high levels of experienced distress are a serious influence on students mental well-being. Research shows that high distress is positively linked with a risk for mental health problems like anxiety disorders and depression (Payton, 2009), which also can be seen in reports of a rise in serious mental health problems in students (Gallagher, Sysko & Zhang, 2001). These effects are possibly long lasting since higher levels of distress during academic years have shown to increase the risk of burn-out related problems and physical impairments in adult life (Riley, 2004; Seyle, 1975). Besides the effect on mental well-being, high levels of distress is also strongly related with lower academic achievement (Samouei et.al., 2015) and impairment of important academic skills as paying attention and focusing (Shankar & Park, 2016).

Research on psychological distress in Cambodian students is limited to two papers. Results of the studies give a range of 50 - 60% of experienced psychological distress in Cambodian students, which is in line with the range of distress levels found in other countries (Cornet, 2018; Pan, 2017). Predictors of distress that where found in both studies where different from worldwide predictors. There was a weak link between academic distress and psychological distress and most demographic variables in both

studies didn't show a significant correlation with psychological distress (Cornet, 2018; Pan, 2017). This can point to cultural influences and shows the need to more research to specifics of psychological distress in Cambodian (students).

**Positive Psychology and Character Strengths**

For a long time there was a tendency In the field of psychology to focus on everything that can go wrong, mental ill-being. Because of this there was a severe lack of research on the positive side of people. What makes people mentally healthy? What are characteristics of people that are living a happy and fulfilling life? How can we understand states as flow, happiness and joy? Positive psychology was aiming to fill this gap in research and since it was announced to be a target domain by Martin Seligman, during his term as president of the APA in 1998, it started a flood of empirical data on positive traits, which is still growing till date. Most noticeable achievement is the construct of a model of character strengths, the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS). This model became the pillar of understanding positive character traits and their effects on human well-being. Character strengths as defined by Seligman and measured by the VIA-IS consists of 24 strengths which are grouped into 6 different virtues (see Table 1 for a complete overview of virtues and character Strengths). These virtues are carefully selected through an extensive study using historical literature from different religions and social beliefs on what is considered good character and behaviour. These virtues can therefore be seen as a general accepted framework for good character with a strong cross-cultural similarity in reported character Strengths (McGrath, 2014).

**Cultural differences.** Although character strengths that are reported often on the VIA-IS are very similar globally, there are minor differences per continent. The biggest difference per country was found in spirituality, which can be explained by the difference in importance of religion per country. Furthermore we see small differences in specific strengths per country although overall the reporting of character strengths seems stable over different cultures. When we look at East-Asia specifically the top 10 Character Strengths that are often reported are: Fairness, Honesty, Openness, Gratitude, Kindness, Love, Curiosity, Teamwork, Hope and Leadership. The five strengths that are reported less often in East-Asia are: Self-Regulation, Modesty, Courage, Zest and Spirituality (McGrath, 2014).

**Table 1.** Virtues and character Strengths as measured with the VIA-IS

| Virtues | Character Strengths | |
|---|---|---|
| Wisdom and Knowledge | Creativity | *thinking of novel and productive ways to do things* |
| | Curiosity | *taking an interest in all experience* |
| | Judgement and open-mindedness | *thinking things through and examining them from all sides* |
| | Love of learning | *mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge* |
| | Perspective | *being able to provide wise counsel to others* |
| Courage | Bravery | *not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain* |
| | Perseverance | *finishing what one starts* |
| | Honesty | *speaking the truth and presenting oneself in a genuine way* |
| | Zest | *approaching life with excitement and energy* |
| Humanity | Capacity to love and be loved | *valuing close relations with others* |
| | Kindness | *doing favors and good deeds for others* |
| | Social Intelligence | *being aware of the motives and feelings of self and others* |
| Justice | Teamwork | *working well as member of a group or team* |
| | Fairness | *treating all people equally* |
| | Leadership | *organizing and overseeing group activities* |
| Temperance | Forgiveness | *forgiving wrongdoing* |
| | Modesty and Humility | *letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves* |
| | Prudence | *showing care in one's choices* |
| | Self-regulation | *regulating what one feels and does* |
| Transcendence | Appreciation of beauty | *appreciating beauty and excellence* |
| | Gratitude | *being aware of and thankful for good things* |
| | Hope | *expecting the best and working to achieve it* |
| | Humor | *liking to laugh and joke* |
| | Religion | *holding coherent beliefs about meaning in life* |

**Effect of character strengths.** There is an abundance of research to the effect of character strengths on areas like happiness, achievement, meaning and life satisfaction. Overall high scores on the VIA-IS are correlated with high levels of life satisfaction which points to a relationship between character strengths and happiness (Ruch et al., 2007). Character strengths that consistently, and over multiple studies, relate strongly with life satisfaction are: Zest, Hope, Gratitude, Curiosity and Love (Niemiec, 2013). There are slight differences in predictors of life satisfaction in different age groups and areas of life. In college students specifically strengths as: hope, social intelligence, self-regulation, and fairness have a strong relationship with life satisfaction (Lounsboury et al., 2009). Besides life satisfaction, character strengths are also related with psychical and mental health. Although we see different strengths being important for different disorders, both Hope and Gratitude are strengths that repeatedly have proven to have a preventive or recovering influence on both mental and physical health disorders (Niemiec, 2013).

**Character strengths and college students.** In general high scores on the VIA-IS show a positive correlation with Academic Achievement, Campus satisfaction and life satisfaction (Lounsboury et al., 2009). Perseverance specifically consistently shows high correlation with academic achievement over different studies. When look at other more common predictors of academic success we see (once more) a positive effect of Gratitude and Hope. Moreover Hope shows an effect on creativity and scholastic competence. Moreover studies show that the character strengths perseverance, fairness, gratitude, honesty, hope and perspective are of higher influence on GPA then IQ. Surprisingly only

one study shows a strong effect of Love of Learning on academic achievement, which common sense tells us should have a big influence in the academic achievement of students. One study looked at character strengths of effective teachers (Teachers where students score a high average GPA). Common character strengths within this group are: social intelligence, zest, and humor (Niemiec, 2013).

**Positive Psychology Interventions**

Due to the focus on well-being, positive psychology is often misinterpreted as a field that ignores mental problems and negative feelings. This is far from true and findings from the field of positive psychology are used to develop preventive interventions for mental health problems with a emphasis on using character strengths to overcome mental distress (Snyder & Lopez, 2002). Positive psychology also recently found its way into the education field and research is done to use Positive Psychology Interventions (PPI) as a possible solution for the challenges that education providers face concerning students mental well-being, retention rates and academic achievement.

PPI is defined by Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) As a psychological intervention which is aimed at raising positive feelings, cognitions and behaviour. This differs from more traditional psychological interventions which are focused on reducing negative symptoms, solving problems or giving treatment for mental disorders. A meta study of Bolier et. Al. (2013) show a raise in well-being and a drop in depressive and stress symptoms in participants that followed PPI. When applied in the field of education, interventions based on positive psychology follow the idea that skills and mindsets that foster positive emotions, relationships and character strengths increase academic success. This is

supported by research that shows an increase in students well-being which on its turn is related with an increase in academic achievement. Furthermore positive education states that positive mindsets, cognition and characters strengths can be learned and taught. Just as knowledge of other course subjects can be learned and taught (Waters, 2011).

**Aim of study**

This study aims to determine common character strengths in Cambodian college students at CamEd Business school. Although the construct of character strengths seems to similar over different cultures there are small differences found per country. Knowing common character profiles of your students opens up the possibility to target growth of specific character strengths that are less common in this population. Succesful PPI's will enable students to develop coping strategies for dealing with psychological distress, which is a much needed skill seeing the high levels of psychological distress found in Cambodian (students). Moreover this will also foster a character profile which will enable students to increase there academic achievements and experience more life satisfaction. Secondly this study will compare character profiles of first year CamEd students with fourth year students. Differences in profiles can lead to more insight in which strengths are helpful for academic achievement in CamEd.

**Hypothesis**

Seeing the before mentioned data about character strengths this study expect the following outcomes:

1. Common character strengths of Cambodian students will be similar to character strengths that are reported often on the VIA-IS by people from East-Asia: Self-Regulation, Modesty, Bravery, Zest and Spirituality

2. The character Strengths Hope, Gratitude and Self-regulation will be more common in fourth years students compared to first year students.

# Method

## Participants

All participants of these study where students at CamEd business school located in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. A total of 61 students filled in the online questionnaire (VIA-IS). The average age of the students is 19.44 ($SD=1.81$). 47 of the respondents where female and 14 male (77% over 23%). 41 students where enrolled in the first year at CamEd and 20 at the fourth year (See table 2).

Table 2. Social-Demographic Characteristics Participants

| | Frequency (n = 61) | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | | |
| Female | 47 | 77.0% |
| Male | 14 | 23.0% |
| | | |
| Age | | |
| 17 | 4 | 6.6% |
| 18 | 20 | 32.8% |
| 19 | 15 | 24.6% |
| 20 | 6 | 9.8% |
| 21 | 6 | 9.8% |
| 22 | 5 | 8.2% |
| 23 | 3 | 4.9% |
| 24 | 2 | 3.3% |
| | | |
| School year | | |
| Year 1 | 41 | 67.2% |
| Year 2 | 20 | 32.8% |

**Measures**

**Character Strengths.** Character strengths where measured with the VIA inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS). The VIA-IS is developed by Peterson and Seligman in 2004 and currently translated in 22 different languages. The survey is used as the main measurement of character strengths in the field of positive psychology. This study is using the VIA-IS 120, this a self-reporting survey which consists of 120 items and is derived from the VIA-IS 240. The VIA-IS 120 covers 24 different strengths whom are each measured by 5 items (see Appendix A). Every item can be answered on a five point likert-scale ranging from *very much like me* until *very much unlike me.* Scores can range from 10 to 50 points for each of the 24 strengths. A higher score on a scale indicates that the participant more strongly identifies with that scale's associated strength. The 24 difference character strengths can be further grouped into 6 different "virtues". The six virtues where retrieved from an extensive review of historical work on character strengths and texts about virtues from eight different religions/cultural traditions. It is stated that these six virtues are commonly seen as character strengths over different cultures and periods of time in history and still have influence on our current social norms (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). A overview of the virtues and there respective character strengths can be found in table 1.

The VIA-IS had good validity and reliability. Studies show that results of the survey correlate strongly on how family and friends describe a persons character strengths. The survey is extensively used in the field of positive psychology for research to character strengths and correlation with other variables. Moreover research shows that the survey is relatively unaffected by self-reporting biases (Niemiec, 2013).

**Procedure**

After approval of the research from viacharacter.org, the VIA-IS was provided digitally to the participants through the website [www.viacharachter.org](www.viacharachter.org). Participants where invited to do the research through mail with a short explanation about the goal of the research and the topic "character strengths". First year students did there surveys through: [http://www.viacharacter.org/survey/pro/RSH7G2/account/register](http://www.viacharacter.org/survey/pro/RSH7G2/account/register) and fourth year students through: [http://www.viacharacter.org/survey/pro/RSHS7K/account/register](http://www.viacharacter.org/survey/pro/RSHS7K/account/register). An instruction on how to fill in the survey was given before the survey and after completion participants got basic feedback about there personal strength profile and where offered a chance for asking questions or more information. None of the participants in this study asked for further information or more details.

Data collection of the survey was done in Excel format by the online research environment of viacharacter.org. For further statistical analysis of the data this study made use of IBM SPSS Statistics version 25.

# Results

**Reliability and general data.** The VIA-IS was completed by 61 participants. The questionnaire was tested for reliability by using the Cronbach's alpha and showed an excellent internal reliability off α = .926 (table 2).

Table 2. Reliability score VIA-IS

|  | Cronbach's Alpha | Items |
|---|---|---|
| VIA-IS | .926 | 24 |

## 1. Common character strengths of Cambodian students will be: Self-Regulation, Modesty, Bravery , Zest and Spirituality.

Looking at the total average scores per character strengths, the top 5 reported strengths in this studies population are: Honesty (4.305), Kindness (4.193), Fairness (4.108), Teamwork (3.964), Leadership (3.948). The expected character strengths where reported less often and can be found near the bottom of the list (Table 3). Although differences can be seen, the average scores of the character strengths are very similar.

We also looked at the average scores for all the six virtues. For the total study population we the virtues form high to low are: Justice (4.020), Humanity (3.807), Courage (3.775), Transcendence (3.738), Wisdom And Knowledge (3.685) and Temperance (3.620) (Table 4). Seeing these outcomes the hypothesis is rejected.

Table3. Average scores character Strengths

| Character strengths | Mean n = 61 | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Honesty | 4.305 | .438 |
| Kindness | 4.193 | .532 |
| Fairness | 4.108 | .520 |
| Teamwork | 3.964 | .547 |
| Leadership | 3.948 | .503 |
| Judgment | 3.938 | .586 |
| Curiosity | 3.879 | .580 |
| Perseverance | 3.853 | .545 |
| Hope | 3.839 | .599 |
| Appreciation Of Beauty | 3.807 | .524 |
| Social-Intelligence | 3.738 | .671 |
| Prudence | 3.738 | .559 |
| Humor | 3.718 | .664 |
| Creativity | 3.708 | .627 |
| Gratitude | 3.653 | .602 |
| Spirituality | 3.636 | .545 |
| Humility | 3.616 | .546 |
| Zest | 3.593 | .540 |
| Perspective | 3.574 | .653 |
| Forgiveness | 3.571 | .554 |
| Bravery | 3.479 | .620 |
| Self-Regulation | 3.443 | .590 |
| Love | 3.423 | .663 |
| Love of Learning | 3.410 | .623 |

Table 4. Average scores per virtue

| Virtues | Mean N = (61) | SD | Items |
|---|---|---|---|
| Justice | 4.020 | .495 | 3 |
| Humanity | 3.807 | .553 | 3 |
| Courage | 3.775 | .429 | 4 |
| Transcendence | 3.738 | .428 | 5 |
| Wisdom And Knowledge | 3.695 | .536 | 5 |
| Temperance | 3.620 | .427 | 4 |

**2. The character Strengths Hope, Gratitude and Self-regulation will be more common in fourth years students compared to first year students.**

For both the character strengths and the virtues we compared the averages from year 1 with year 4. At first look year 1 students seem to report higher on most character strengths more strongly then year 4 students except for Appreciation of beauty and Judgement and Perspective. The overall differences between the character strengths seem small (Graph. 1).

Graph 1. Character strengths Year 1 vs. Year 4.
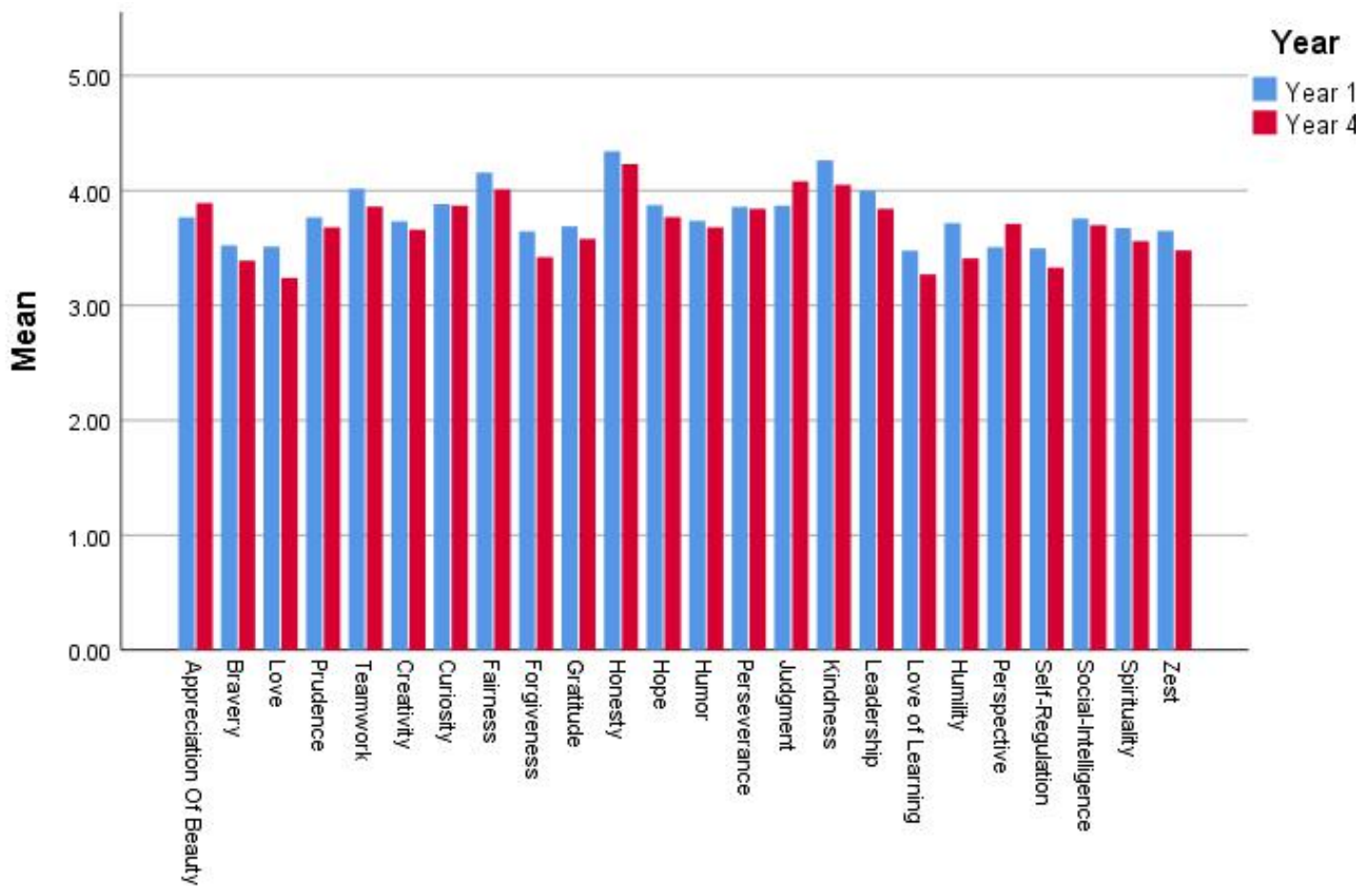
When looking at the strengths when grouped in the six virtues we see a similar results on first look. Most virtues are scored higher by year 1 students. The biggest difference can be found in the Virtue Justice (Graph 2.)

Graph 2: Average virtues Year 1 vs. Year 4.
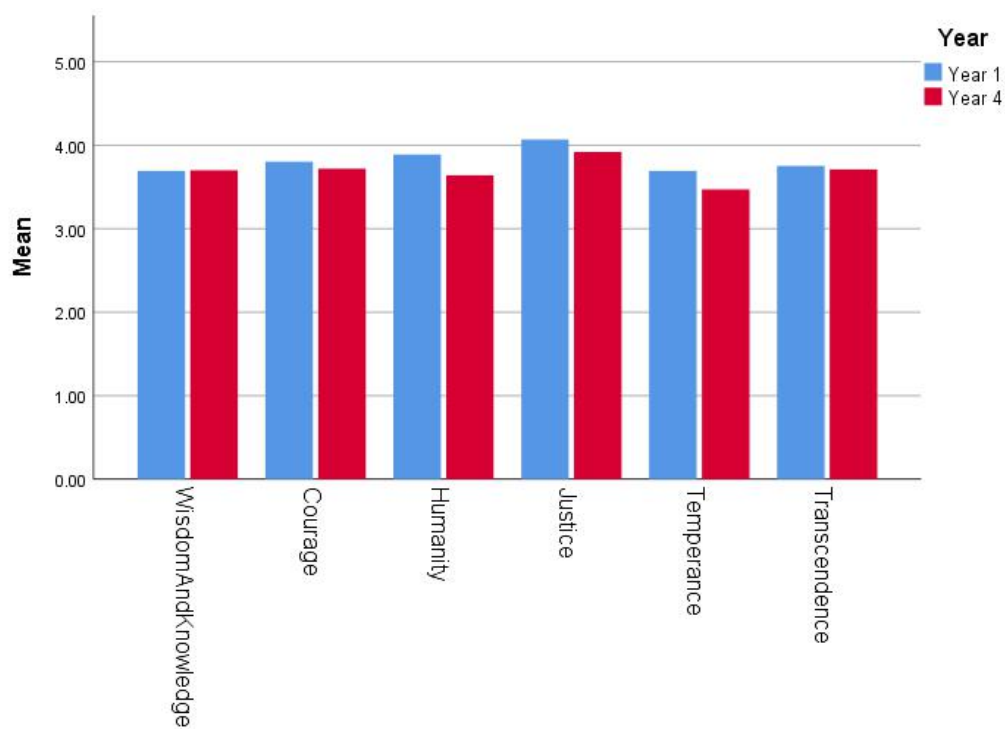
Further analysis was done to the average differences on character strengths. As expected after the first analysis all the character strengths, except one, are not significantly different. Only Humility shows a significant difference (F= 4.506, p=.038) between year 1 and year 2. Where Year 1 students report higher on Humility then the year students (Table 5). Seeing these outcomes the hypothesis is rejected.

Table5. One way Anova. Testing significant differences in character strengths per year

| Character Strengths | | SS | sf | MS | F | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Appreciation Of Beauty | Between Groups | .207 | 1 | .207 | .751 | .390 |
| | Within Groups | 16.270 | 59 | .276 | | |
| Bravery | Between Groups | .234 | 1 | .234 | .605 | .440 |
| | Within Groups | 22.828 | 59 | .387 | | |
| Love | Between Groups | .996 | 1 | .996 | 2.312 | .134 |
| | Within Groups | 25.412 | 59 | .431 | | |
| Prudence | Between Groups | .099 | 1 | .099 | .313 | .578 |
| | Within Groups | 18.664 | 59 | .316 | | |
| Teamwork | Between Groups | .321 | 1 | .321 | 1.075 | .304 |
| | Within Groups | 17.639 | 59 | .299 | | |
| Creativity | Between Groups | .069 | 1 | .069 | .174 | .678 |
| | Within Groups | 23.497 | 59 | .398 | | |
| Curiosity | Between Groups | .002 | 1 | .002 | .007 | .936 |
| | Within Groups | 20.180 | 59 | .342 | | |
| Fairness | Between Groups | .287 | 1 | .287 | 1.063 | .307 |
| | Within Groups | 15.919 | 59 | .270 | | |
| Forgiveness | Between Groups | .674 | 1 | .674 | 2.245 | .139 |
| | Within Groups | 17.713 | 59 | .300 | | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gratitude | Between Groups | .156 | 1 | .156 | .427 | .516 |
| | Within Groups | 21.596 | 59 | .366 | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Honesty | Between Groups | .167 | 1 | .167 | .870 | .355 |
| | Within Groups | 11.322 | 59 | .192 | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Hope | Between Groups | .143 | 1 | .143 | .395 | .532 |
| | Within Groups | 21.362 | 59 | .362 | | |
| | Total | 21.506 | 60 | | | |
| Humor | Between Groups | .043 | 1 | .043 | .096 | .757 |
| | Within Groups | 26.387 | 59 | .447 | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Perseverance | Between Groups | .005 | 1 | .005 | .015 | .902 |
| | Within Groups | 17.828 | 59 | .302 | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Judgment | Between Groups | .602 | 1 | .602 | 1.777 | .188 |
| | Within Groups | 20.001 | 59 | .339 | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Kindness | Between Groups | .612 | 1 | .612 | 2.210 | .142 |
| | Within Groups | 16.345 | 59 | .277 | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Leadership | Between Groups | .344 | 1 | .344 | 1.367 | .247 |
| | Within Groups | 14.848 | 59 | .252 | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Love of Learning | Between Groups | .582 | 1 | .582 | 1.510 | .224 |
| | Within Groups | 22.732 | 59 | .385 | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Humility | Between Groups | 1.268 | 1 | 1.268 | 4.506 | *.038 |
| | Within Groups | 16.596 | 59 | .281 | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Perspective | Between Groups | .552 | 1 | .552 | 1.303 | .258 |
| | Within Groups | 25.006 | 59 | .424 | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Self-Regulation | Between Groups | .377 | 1 | .377 | 1.086 | .302 |
| | Within Groups | 20.512 | 59 | .348 | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Social-Intelligence | Between Groups | .042 | 1 | .042 | .093 | .762 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Within Groups | 26.961 | 59 | .457 | | |
| Spirituality | Between Groups | .172 | 1 | .172 | .576 | .451 |
| | Within Groups | 17.628 | 59 | .299 | | |
| Zest | Between Groups | .383 | 1 | .383 | 1.319 | .255 |
| | Within Groups | 17.134 | 59 | .290 | | |

*$P < .05$

# Discussion

## Outcomes and expectations

The findings of these study show an overall high score on reported character strengths in CamEd students. Overall high scores on the VIA-IS are linked with higher academic achievement and well-being. When we compare the common character strengths as reported in this study with the general south east Asia population we see no similarities in the most reported Strengths. There are different possible explanations for these findings. The lower scores on the strength 'Spirituality' is can be explained by a cultural influence since it is known that reporting of this strength can vary strongly per country. Cultural influences on other strengths can be excluded as an explanation since an meta-study of McGrath (2014) shows a low cultural influence on other strengths. Another possible explanation of the findings can be found in the target population of this study. All participants are studying at CamEd business school Phnom Penh. Students enrolled at this school are most likely sharing similar character specifics, which can be different then the rest of the Cambodian (student) and the South East Asia population.

Apart from 'Humility' there is no significant difference in reported character strengths between students enrolled in Year 1 compared with Year 4. The Strengths Hope, Gratitude and Self-regulation where expected to be reported more in Year 4 since the positive influence of these strengths on academic achievement. Most of these Strengths where in fact reported more often in Year 1 students. Possibly character strengths are of less importance for academic achievement in CamEd, although this explanation is not supported by other research on academic achievement and Strengths (Niemiec, 2013). Another explanation can be found in the sample size difference between Year 1 (41) and

Year 2 (20), which can hamper comparability and generalization of the data. Moreover the best design to determine the effect of character Strengths on academic achievement in CamEd would be a longitudal study where students enrolled in Year 1 are repeatedly tested on Strengths and academic achievement during their career at CamEd.

**Implications**

**Overall character profile.** If we look at the overall character profile of this studies population we see common reports of the Strengths Honesty, Kindness, Fairness, Teamwork, Leadership which are related with the virtues: Justice, Humanity and Courage. This points to an average character profile of students that have a tendency of being helpful, which are non-judgemental, are truthful and are good in group related work. Although we speak of overall averages, which leaves a lot of room for individual differences, these findings show a general character profile of CamEd students as a whole which seem fitting for some of the key focus areas that CamEd applies in their education.

**PPI's in CamEd.** Using the data of these study with what we know about influence on character Strengths and their positive influence, we can discuss some possible interventions specified on the character profiles of CamEd students. As discussed earlier PPI's in education (have proven to) serve two causes: Prevention of mental-health distress and heightening academic achievements of students. Earlier research tells us that the Strengths 'Hope' and 'Gratitude' show a strong effect on life-satisfaction and achievement in college students (Waters, 2011). Seeing that CamEd students overall score average on both strengths, interventions can be implemented to foster growth of these

strengths in particular. Interventions based on positive psychology can be applied in different ways and range from workshops, multiple week programs, implementation in curriculum's to whole-school approaches. Although all of these forms of PPI have shown to be effective in some way, most researched interventions where giving by lectures themself and where included into already existing curriculum's (Waters, 2011; Seligman, 2009).

Curriculum's in CamEd have great opportunities for implementation of positive interventions. The most easy form of integration can be using positive topics, or using a stronger focus on character Strengths, in assignment of existing courses (specifically freshman year courses in CamEd). Studies as discussed by Waters (2011) show a growth in Hope and Gratitude when students there writing assignments are based on topics related with Hope. Assigned English literature readings can be focused on literature with a more positive focus. Students can be taught about human flourishing and insights in students their own character profile and Strengths (for example by using the VIA-IS). Learning students analyze their own strengths and help them to use these strengths in their own benefit have shown to grow character Strengths that are linked with achievement and engagement at school (Seligman, 2009). At CamEd this could easily be implemented in the courses Psychology or Team Psychology ans would be fitting with the learning outcomes of both courses. Other possible interventions in existing courses can foster Gratitude by assigned weekly writings of things students where grateful for or to let students keep journals of positive experiences where they used their strengths. Lastly as part of the grading and feedback on group assignments there should be a focus on reflecting on individual used strengths in the group process and letting students discuss

how to use their individual Strengths differently in future group related projects. It has shown that this use of feedback amplifies Strengths and growth of Strengths in students (Seligman, 2009).

Positive interventions can be, and are more effective when, applied in a whole school approach. This means that all lectures as well as non-lecturers are educated in techniques of positive psychology and approach the students of the school in a similar fashion. When staff of school are well aware of there own strengths and experiencing a high mental well-being themselves, we see this having an effect on students well-being and achievement too. (Jennings & Greenberg, as cited by, Waters, 2011). Furthermore we see a positive influence on academic achievement in students from which their lectures are scoring high on character strengths, which shows the importance of not only educating staff about an approach that is using positive psychology but also foster growth of character strengths in staff itself (Niemiec, 2013).

# Limitations

This study has several limitations. First of all the small sample size. Especially for the fourth year students the total sample consists of only 20 students. Any general conclusions about Cambodian students can therefore not be made. Also conclusions for students of CamEd in general should be taken with care.

Furthermore the collection of data was done in such a way that an inclusive bias is possible. Participants where mailed the questionnaire and only a part of the total students population responded. It is probable that only the students with specific personality traits responded on the questionnaire. Since the research is measuring character strengths this is of possible influence on the outcomes of this research.

Finally this research discusses positive interventions to foster growth of specific character strengths. There is no research to the effectiveness of these interventions on students from non-western countries or Cambodian students in specific. Furthermore we see a spread of type of students and ages in the discussed studies to effectiveness of interventions and effectiveness of these interventions in the Cambodian college students population is thereby not proven.

# Conclusion

Seeing the growth of mental distress in students and its effect on students mental well-being and academic achievement it becomes more important for educational providers to find ways to support their students. The relatively new field of positive psychology provides a framework for interventions and approaches that have proven to improve mental well-being and academic achievement in students. This study gives a first insights in common character Strengths profiles in Cambodian students of CamEd Business school. It shows character profiles that are different when compared with common reported Strengths in South East Asia population and surprisingly shows no significant difference in common reported strengths when we compare first year with fourth year students. This data can be used to develop interventions targeting on character strengths that are less prevalent in this population. Although it also shows the need of further research using a wider spread of students (different years and schools) and research on the effectiveness of positive psychology interventions on the Cambodian student population.

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## Appendix A

1. Being able to come up with new and different ideas is one of my strong points.

2. I have taken frequent stands in the face of strong opposition.

3. I never quit a task before it is done.

4. I always keep my promises.

5. I have no trouble eating healthy foods.

6. I always look on the bright side.

7. I am a spiritual person.

8. I know how to handle myself in different social situations.

9. I always finish what I start.

10. I really enjoy doing small favors for friends.

11. There are people in my life who care as much about my feelings and well-being as they do about their own.

12. As a leader, I treat everyone equally well regardless of his or her experience.

13. Even when candy or cookies are under my nose, I never overeat.

14. I practice my religion.

15. I rarely hold a grudge.

16. I am always busy with something interesting.

17. I am thrilled when I learn something new.

18. I like to think of new ways to do things.

19. No matter what the situation, I am able to fit in.

20    I never hesitate to publicly express an unpopular opinion.

21    I believe honesty is the basis for trust.

22    I go out of my way to cheer up people who appear down.

23    I treat all people equally regardless of who they might be.

24    One of my strengths is helping a group of people work well together even

when they have their differences.

25    I am a highly disciplined person.

26    I always think before I speak.

27    I experience deep emotions when I see beautiful things.

28    At least once a day, I stop and count my blessings.

29    Despite challenges, I always remain hopeful about the future.

30    My faith never deserts me during hard times.

31    I do not act as if I am a special person.

32    I welcome the opportunity to brighten someone else's day with laughter.

33    I never seek vengeance.

34    I value my ability to think critically.

35    I have the ability to make other people feel interesting.

36    I must stand up for what I believe even if there are negative results.

37    I finish things despite obstacles in the way.

38    I love to make other people happy.

39    I am the most important person in someone else's life.

40     I work at my very best when I am a group member.

41     Everyone's rights are equally important to me.

42     I see beauty that other people pass by without noticing.

43     I have a clear picture in my mind about what I want to happen in the future.

44     I never brag about my accomplishments.

45     I try to have fun in all kinds of situations.

46     I love what I do.

47     I am excited by many different activities.

48     I am a true life-long learner.

49     I am always coming up with new ways to do things.

50     People describe me as "wise beyond my years."

51     My promises can be trusted.

52     I give everyone a chance.

53     To be an effective leader, I treat everyone the same.

54     I never want things that are bad for me in the long run, even if they make me feel good in the short run.

55     I have often been left speechless by the beauty depicted in a movie.

56     I am an extremely grateful person.

57     I try to add some humor to whatever I do.

58     I look forward to each new day.

59     I believe it is best to forgive and forget.

60      I have many interests.

61      When the topic calls for it, I can be a highly rational thinker.

62      My friends say that I have lots of new and different ideas.

63      I am always able to look at things and see the big picture.

64      I always stand up for my beliefs.

65      I do not give up.

66      I am true to my own values.

67      I always feel the presence of love in my life.

68      I can always stay on a diet.

69      I think through the consequences every time before I act.

70      I am always aware of the natural beauty in the environment.

71      My faith makes me who I am.

72      I have lots of energy.

73      I can find something of interest in any situation.

74      I read all of the time.

75      Thinking things through is part of who I am.

76      I am an original thinker.

77      I am good at sensing what other people are feeling.

78      I have a mature view on life.

79      I am as excited about the good fortune of others as I am about my own.

80      I can express love to someone else.

81    Without exception, I support my teammates or fellow group members.

82    My friends always tell me I am a strong but fair leader.

83    I always keep straight right from wrong.

84    I feel thankful for what I have received in life.

85    I know that I will succeed with the goals I set for myself.

86    I rarely call attention to myself.

87    I have a great sense of humor.

88    I rarely try to get even.

89    I always weigh the pro's and con's.

90    I stick with whatever I decide to do.

91    I enjoy being kind to others.

92    I can accept love from others.

93    Even if I disagree with them, I always respect the leaders of my group.

94    Even if I do not like someone, I treat him or her fairly.

95    As a leader, I try to make all group members happy.

96    I am a very careful person.

97    I am in awe of simple things in life that others might take for granted

98    When I look at my life, I find many things to be grateful for.

99    I have been told that modesty is one of my most notable characteristics.

100   I am usually willing to give someone another chance.

101   I think my life is extremely interesting.

102    I read a huge variety of books.

103    I try to have good reasons for my important decisions.

104    I always know what to say to make people feel good.

105    I may not say it to others, but I consider myself to be a wise person.

106    It is important to me to respect decisions made by my group.

107    I always make careful choices.

108    I feel a profound sense of appreciation every day.

109    If I feel down, I always think about what is good in my life.

110    My beliefs make my life important.

111    I awaken with a sense of excitement about the day's possibilities.

112    I love to read nonfiction books for fun.

113    Others consider me to be a wise person.

114    I am a brave person.

115    Others trust me to keep their secrets.

116    I gladly sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of the group I am in.

117    I believe that it is worth listening to everyone's opinions.

118    People are drawn to me because I am humble.

119    I am known for my good sense of humor.

120    People describe me as full of zest.