A Strengths Awareness Pilot for an Australian University Mentoring Program

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Abstract

Strengths-based initiatives for university students to identify and develop their strengths are increasing in popularity in the tertiary sector. An understanding of strengths provides students with greater resilience in their transition in and out of university. While such strengths-based initiatives have been studied among first-year student populations at large universities in the United States, scant research has been conducted on strengths development in the Australian tertiary sector. This mixed methods study evaluates the efficacy of the use of the CliftonStrengths Assessment and targeted strengths workshops on a group of mentors and mentees within a peer mentoring program at a university in Australia. Quantitative analysis indicated increases in strengths awareness. Qualitative analysis also revealed participants could positively view their strengths, identify a plan for future strengths use, and view others and themselves in a new light. This study served as a base for further research into strengths development at Australian universities.

Introduction

Development of a Strengths-Based Approach

In education and workplaces, a focus on identifying and cultivating personal strengths has increased in popularity following the rise of 'Positive Psychology'. As opposed to previous models with a focus on simply 'surviving', Positive Psychology saw a model of fostering resilience, or 'thriving' (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Consequently, positive psychological research with a focus on building resilience is pertinent to the development of evidence-based interventions. Thus, the question of whether to identify and target weaknesses (a deficit approach) or identify and develop traits of talent (a strengths approach) has been discussed for both workplaces and educational settings.

Recent research has provided increasing support for the strengths-based approach. In the workplace, Gradito Dubord and Forest (2023) opined that a strengths-based approach had significant positive effects on psychological wellbeing and workplace motivation. Conversely, the deficit approach did not indicate a significant effect on psychological wellbeing, and even indicated further negative psychological effects. Meyers et al. (2015) discussed similar findings through a Personal Growth Initiative (PGI) framework. Here, PGI is defined as "a positive and proactive stance toward change and continuous self-improvement" (p. 50). Meyers et al. found that whilst there were positive effects from both interventions, the strengths approach saw greater increases to PGI and hope. Thus, with greater (though still limited) support for a strengths-based approach in the literature, workplaces and higher education models may benefit from a strengths-based approach when considering intervention for improving psychological wellbeing.

Among strengths approaches themselves, theoretical intentions can differ between *talent identification* and *strengths development* (Louis, 2011). In the former, participants may be encouraged to label and celebrate their unique strengths.

Comparatively, a strengths development initiative also begins with identification of strengths but includes further direction for *building* on and using these strengths (Louis, 2011). Ghielen et al. (2018) add that, in order to optimise benefits for participants, interventions should ideally include opportunities for participants to apply their learnings through avenues like practice, feedback, and behavioural modelling. Louis and Lopez (2014) also caution that when strengths initiatives only provide "affirming descriptive labels" it may cause participants to view their identified traits as innate (p. 80). This may result in a fixed mindset and thus decrease motivation for working towards challenges. Consequently, Louis and Lopez posit that the implicit and explicit messaging from strengths interventions must frame the information presented as a starting point for future development and encourage work to be put into this development.

Strengths-Based Initiatives in Higher Education

Harnessing and developing students' strengths may assist in their social development as they transition to university. As research has demonstrated, this transition period is key to supporting student's persistence, wellbeing and outcomes within higher education (Kift 2009; Krause & Coates, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1994). This transition period also requires intentional support in relation to a student's social engagement and development (Hoffman et al., 2002; Kift et al., 2010). Utilising a strengths-based approach as part of the transition process supports a shift from the deficit narrative regarding a potential lack in capital, knowledge and skills, which is often attributed to students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds (O'Shea, 2016; Yosso, 2005). In order to provide support for students, some campuses in the United States have invested in strengths approaches and establishing strengths-based initiatives (Lopez & Louis, 2009). Within these strengths-based initiatives, practitioners have measured strengths use and key educational indicators (such as hope, wellbeing and engagement) to help understand potential variances in retention, achievement and attendance among students (Lopez & Louis, 2009). Subsequently, implementation of strengths-based assessment and intervention in tertiary education settings may be an effective tool for improving student transition and wellbeing.

To aid in the first step of a strengths approach, a variety of assessments have been developed to classify strengths for participants. In particular, Gallup's CliftonStrengths Assessment (formerly Clifton StrengthsFinder) has been adopted by workplaces and in some higher education settings. Whilst a majority of studies utilising the CliftonStrengths Assessment occur in workplaces, its adaptation in higher education settings remain limited, nonetheless with promising findings (Ingamells et al., 2013; Lane & Schutts, 2014; Soria & Stubblefield, 2015a).

In a study that looked at university students who took the Clifton StrengthsFinder Assessment, Soria and Stubblefield (2015a) found that the intervention resulted in a higher retention rate compared with their peers who did not take the assessment. The study indicated that when viewing retention data among the first-year students, "91.5% (n =4,653) of first year students who took the StrengthsFinder were retained compared to 80.8% (n=227) of students who did not take the StrengthsFinder Assessment" p. 629-630). When Soria & Stubblefield (2015a) measured students' strengths awareness and engagement with the strengths initiative (n=1,493) through a Strengths Awareness Measure (Anderson, 2004), they found that students' participation in the pilot, such as strengths-based discussions, connected to greater odds of retention, when compared with the other measures in the study.

In another study (n=217), Lane and Schutts (2014) showed that the CliftonStrengths Assessment can be a particularly useful tool in higher educational settings. The study's findings suggest that an "increased belief in one's talents is associated with higher levels of hope and life satisfaction" (p. 20). The study indicated that the CliftonStrengths Assessment can be an excellent way of developing individuals to feel motivated to apply their talents. A separate study by Soria and Stubblefield (2015b), echoed that hope is an important measure, as it "has the potential to leverage college students' academic success, problem-solving skills and well-being" (p. 51). This study found that when first-year students understand their strengths and plan to develop them, they were more hopeful in reaching their goals. Whilst the self-report nature of these studies may "paint an incomplete picture when it comes to actual achievement or outcomes," the findings provide novel insights into the capacity for strengths-based assessment to improve the lives of university students (p. 23).

Lastly, Ingamells et al. (2013) conducted a study (n=75) at the Unitec Institute of Technology in New Zealand with Bachelor of Nursing and Bachelor of Social Practice students. This study looked at whether strength appreciation and identification were correlated with confidence and engagement in social work and nursing education. The authors noted that the CliftonStrengths Assessment, combined with coaching and Narratives of Strengths interviews (guided reflection), were helpful for students to "identify their talents and contextualise them within their life histories and career aspirations" (p.83). Though this study is of a cohort at a single institution in New Zealand, which may limit its generalisability to Australian education settings, the findings contribute to a wider discourse on the use of the CliftonStrengths Assessment in tertiary education.

Strengths Utilisation in Australian Higher Education

Despite the number of studies examining strengths-based educational approaches, there has been scant research done on this topic in the space of Australian higher education. A meta-analysis of higher education strengths initiatives in the last decade (2013-2023) found that most studies were on undergraduates in the United States (Gallup, 2023). The large-scale studies that have been done at U.S. institutions provide a basis for understanding the impact of strengths awareness interventions on students; however, there are many notable differences between tertiary campuses in the U.S. and Australia. In Australia, many first-year transition initiatives are often not mandatory. By comparison, Soria & Stubblefield (2015b), were able to provide all first-year students (n=5,514) a code to take the StrengthsFinder Assessment at the beginning of the semester as part of transition procedures. For many tertiary institutions in Australia, a university-wide strengths approach, such as this, can be a challenge. For Australian institutions, more bespoke interventions for specific student cohorts might provide a foothold into strengths development.

Methodology

The current study took place at an Australian university during the second half of 2023. Ethical approval was given for the purpose of this study (Protocol 2023/243). Participants were students within a cross-disciplinary peer mentoring program who had expressed interest in the strengths pilot. The peer mentoring program, which focuses on aiding students in their social transition to university, encompasses students from all study levels and involves both domestic and international students. In this pilot, 50 students were invited to participate, with 27 undertaking the CliftonStrengths Assessment and completing the two workshops. Of the 27 participants, six were mentors (later-year students) and 21 were mentees (new students). Mentors and mentees who participated in the pilot were not necessarily matched together in the peer mentoring aspect of the program.

Design and Measures

Gallup's CliftonStrengths Assessment was chosen as the instrument for this study due to its use in similar studies conducted across U.S. campuses. Two Gallup-Certified strengths coaches conducted two workshops for the participants. The first 90-minute workshop focused on the "Top 5 Strengths" reports that each participant received after completing the CliftonStrengths Assessment. Both mentors and mentees attended the first workshop together. The second 45-minute workshop (two-weeks post-workshop 1) focused on "aiming" these strengths and discussing how strengths can also sometimes hinder efforts. Separate workshops were provided for mentors and mentees. In the mentee workshop, participants explored how their strengths could support them in the specific challenges that first-year students face, such as making new friends, looking after themselves, and balancing study. For the mentor workshop, participants focused on how their unique strengths can be used for their role as a mentor, including setting boundaries and building a relationship with their mentees.

Prior to taking the CliftonStrengths Assessment or attending a workshop, participants were asked to take a baseline survey. This survey is a Strengths Awareness Measure (SAM) (Anderson, 2004), which has been previously used by Soria and Stubblefield ($\alpha = .93$; 2015a & 2015b). In a 10-question Likert scale, participants were asked to rate their agreement to items such as "I can name my top five strengths," "I like to learn about myself," and "understanding my strengths helps me to do what I do best."

After each workshop, participants were asked to again complete the SAM. In the surveys that followed each workshop, an additional three "free answer" questions were asked of the participants. The questions included: "what was your take-away from this workshop?," "what is one way that you have applied your strengths recently at university or in your personal life?" and "how has learning about your strengths influenced your experience of university so far?" The surveys were completed anonymously but were able to be linked through unique identifying codes.

The current study incorporates a mix-methods design that utilises pre-test and post-test evaluation. This research design was adopted due to the benefits, including the illumination of "participants' experiences in context", while also quantitatively testing the significance of the interventions (Fetters, 2023, p. 7). Data gathered from the SAM were analysed to indicate whether the CliftonStrengths Assessment and associated workshop interventions could have resulted in increased strengths awareness among participants. Participant answers from the SAM were combined to result in one score, and an overall measure of their awareness of their strengths. Data from the "free answer" questions within the survey were then analysed to shed light on participants' feelings and views towards strengths and future uses of their strengths.

Qualitative and Quantitative analysis were performed separately, with one researcher completing the qualitative analysis and the second completing the quantitative analysis. Analysis of interaction between qualitative and quantitative trends occurred

after the original analysis for each took place, to ensure that the qualitative analysis was not influenced by the emerging quantitative trends.

Data Analysis

Results – Quantitative

Quantitative analysis was conducted through SPSS (Version 29). Descriptive statistics for T1, T2, and T3 are presented in Table 1 below. The difference in mean scores (= 0.729) from Time 1 (pre-intervention) to Time 3 (post-intervention) indicates an increase in strengths awareness at two-week follow-up for participants. A repeated measures ANOVA determined that participant strengths awareness scores had a statistically significant increase between time points ($F(2, 42) = 24.362, p < .001$) at a confidence interval of 95%. Paired sample t-tests were run to examine the difference in average strengths awareness scores for each survey item at pre versus post strengths awareness intervention (Table 2). Analyses revealed that seven items describe a statistically significant increase in strengths awareness at survey follow-up. Three items were non-significant (items 2, 6 and 8).

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviations for the Strengths Awareness Measure

Time	M	SD
T1 (Baseline - Pre-Clifton Strengths Assessment)	3.778	0.62532
T2 (post-workshop 1)	3.40926	0.43934
T3 (post-workshop 2 – 2-week follow-up)	4.50682	0.4442

n = 27. Scores were measured on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, with higher values indicating greater strengths awareness.

Table 2

Analysis of all Items within the Strengths Awareness Measure

Item	t	df
Q1: I can name my top five strengths	-7.406**	21
Q2: Understanding my strengths helps me to do what I do best	-1.891	21
Q3: I know how my strengths impact my relationships	-5.775**	21
Q4: I like to learn about myself	-2.628*	21
Q5: Behaviours I used to see as irritating I now see as strengths	-6.693**	20
Q6: I can see other people in light of their strengths	-1.914	21
Q7: I know how to apply my strengths to achieve academic success.	-4.737**	21
Q8: I want to know the strengths of the people in my life.	-0.961	21
Q9: I can easily relate what I am learning to who I am as a person	-7.372**	21
Q10: I have a plan for developing my strengths.	-3.846**	21

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Results - Qualitative

Participant responses to three free answer questions allowed for qualitative analysis of participant experiences. In the free answer survey questions, participants were able to write what they wished. The results of analysis from these questions follows below.

We utilised an inductive comparative approach to generate codes to assist with theme clarification. Qualitative analysis was conducted through the NVivo 12 System. After written responses to the free answer questions were uploaded to the system, an in vivo coding approach was utilised as a first-round coding. In vivo coding is often used to preserve the voice of the participant, by capturing codes based on the language used by the participants (Saldaña, 2021). Broader codes at this stage included, but were not limited to, "diversity", "uniqueness" and "understanding." Then, structural coding, which assists to "examine comparable segments' commonalities, differences, and relationships" (p. 84) was utilised to understand how the various codes related to one another. Thematic analysis was then used to create broader categories that the codes fit into. Coding was performed separate to the quantitative analysis, which ensured that code generation was not influenced by emerging trends in the quantitative data.

Through the thematic analysis, the following themes emerged:

- Positive reframing of strengths
- Plan for future use of strengths
- A unique view of self and others

Positive Reframing of Strengths

Participants' reflections from the first workshop clarified that many participants were able to reframe traits that they may have seen as previous weaknesses. In addition, many participants were able to positively describe traits that they were unable to previously articulate. The significance of this ability to "re-frame" was illuminated in the responses of many of the participants. One participant (Participant 6, mentee), remarked after the first workshop, "I realise what I considered as weaknesses are something that are actually strength." This participant further remarked after the second workshop that "the weaknesses that I used to know are something that bring me to success if I can utilise them in the right way." Another Participant (Participant 8, mentee) noted that from the first workshop they learned, "to think more about how to succeed with strengths and no more worries on disadvantages."

After the second workshop, Participant 22 (mentee) explained how the assessment and workshops helped to provide a word for the traits and actions they were already exhibiting. They noted, "it has helped me analyse how I have used my strengths unknowingly and helped to see some of the actions I made in a better light." Participant 13 (mentor) echoed this same sentiment, noting that "actually we might be already using those top 5 themes during mentoring but sometimes we just didn't realise it." Participants showing examples of reframing how they view personal talents is congruent with what Clifton et al. (2006) discussed when students "wear strengths-coloured glasses" (p. 75). One of the first things that students see differently are themselves. Providing a more positive view of themselves enables students to feel more confident to achieve their goals. This emergent theme of participants reframing their self-concept of strengths is mirrored in previously described quantitative analyses. Item five of the SAM asked participants to rate their level of agreement with the following statement: "behaviours I used to see as irritating I now see as strengths" (Table 2). The observed trend in both quantitative and qualitative analyses highlights participants objective and subjective experiences of reframing one's strengths.

Plan for Future Use of Strengths

In addition, participants reflected on how the strengths intervention allowed them to create a plan to continue using and developing their strengths. Participants in this study exhibited understanding of exactly how they planned to continue to call on their strengths in the future. Participant 18 (mentor) indicated that the workshop "has encouraged me to seek out further opportunities to harness/enhance these strengths." After the second workshop, Participant 18 (mentor) noted again that the workshops "helped to strengthen/prioritize my plans." Another participant (Participant 5, mentee) echoed similar learnings in reference to their strengths: "don't ignore them. Improve and use them."

Similarly, reflections from participants that indicate their intention to plan and prioritize strength development was also reflected in quantitative analyses. Analysis of question 10, "I have a plan for developing my strengths" (Table 2), echoes the future intentions of participants when utilising strengths.

A Unique View of Self and Others

Another common sentiment among participants' responses included a greater understanding of how unique they are. For example, Participant 25 (mentor), explained that after the second workshop, they learned, "how all strengths contribute to your problem solving approach and the different ways that individuals approach problems." Another participant, Participant 11 (mentee), reflected that after the first workshop, they understood that, "everyone is unique in their own way. My strengths don't necessarily describe who I am but might help me understand and develop myself." With regard to the strengths of others, Participant 2 (mentee) explained that from the workshop, they felt that, "I would take away the rich diversity of strengths I see in other people and how they use them."

Notably, participant sentiments of the uniqueness of others were not observed in quantitative analyses assessing similar concepts. Item 6 of the SAM: "I can see other people in light of their strengths," produced a non-significant result (as observed in Table 2). These results may suggest a difference in the objectively self-reported experience of others' uniqueness, as opposed to the subjective feelings of others' uniqueness as described by participants qualitatively.

Discussion of Results

According to Clifton & Harter (2003), a true strengths approach involves "identification of talent, integration into one's view of self, and changed behaviour" (p. 3). Qualitative analysis of participant reflection indicate that the present study aligns with the framework of strengths-based approaches, as understood by Clifton & Harter (2003). The present study provides empirical support for the effectiveness of a Strengths Awareness pilot for students in an Australian tertiary education setting. Quantitative analyses revealed a significant mean difference in strengths awareness scores among participants following workshop attendance. Qualitative analyses provided further support for the effectiveness of the pilot and provided meaningful observations regarding the positive impact of the pilot for participants. Thematic analysis revealed three key themes: that participants were able to positively reframe their weaknesses as strengths, view themselves and others as unique, and plan for the future use of these strengths in applied contexts. These results were partially supported by quantitative analyses of SAM survey items.

The thematic results of this study were consistent with previous literature outlining the benefits of strengths awareness in tertiary education settings (Lane & Schutts, 2014). In particular, this study similarly reveals a motivation among students to apply their strengths in their personal and academic lives. Further, the effective identification and contextualisation of strengths echoes previous findings by Ingamells et al. (2013). Although the exploratory nature of the present study limits quantitative comparisons to previous literature (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015a), the results provide a budding quantitative framework for future strengths awareness studies in Australian tertiary settings.

The present study addresses previous suggestions to optimise strengths-based approaches for participants. Firstly, as described by Ghielen et al. (2018), workshops included opportunities for participants to apply their learnings in an applied context (i.e., via specific scenarios like making new friends). Further, to address Louis and Lopez's (2014) concerns that strengths-based approaches can foster a fixed mindset, the present study sought to frame strengths learning as lifelong. As such, both quantitative and qualitative results saw positive improvements in participant conceptualisations of future use of strengths.

This study has provided a variety of novel additions to higher education research. Whilst other studies in the United States have trialled strengths approaches among entire student body cohorts or through compulsory orientation activities, this study has focused on a bespoke cohort of a peer mentoring program at an Australian university. In the context of Australian university transition programs/activities, large scale interventions may not be a possibility, due to the de-centralised nature of Australian university systems. As such, the results of this study speak to the effectiveness of strengths-based interventions in an Australian higher education context, either in a mentor or mentee capacity. Thus, these results further bolster support for the effectiveness of such interventions in higher education settings.

Limitations

Despite its promising findings, this study has a few limitations. Foremost, the sample size of this study (n=27) limits the generalisation of these findings. Particularly, the small sample size limits the weight of the conclusions that can be drawn from quantitative findings. Additionally, as obtaining demographic data was limited due to ethical considerations, richer observations that may have benefitted from more descriptive demography were limited. Further, the cohort that was studied involved students that chose to participate in both the study and a mentoring program. Self-selection bias is a possibility, given that students chose to participate in a mentoring program. Lastly, students from various backgrounds will bring with them pre-

set understandings of strengths, shaped by their dominant cultural background. Preconceived understandings of strengths, rooted in different cultural views of strengths could have also impacted the study's results.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the smaller-sample size, this study presents a starting point for strengths development research in the Australian tertiary sector. Given the inferential limitations as outlined above, further research may wish to include demographic information on participants. In addition, further studies may wish to examine how effective strengths awareness and development is for students of diverse cultural backgrounds. With respect to expanding strengths-based research in Australian tertiary contexts, future research would benefit from the assessment of strengths awareness programs on student retention and wellbeing. This study intended to provide a foothold into strengths development research at universities in Australia, in the hope of spurring further research into the development of strengths initiatives at universities in Oceania. In this way, we hope that this research will provide avenues for the development of evidence-based programs that ultimately benefit students' wellbeing in their transition to university.

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