

Cultivating Character through Co-Curriculars: Finding a Framework for the University of Oxford's Local School Engagement Programmes

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Abstract

Educational inequality remains a significant issue within Oxfordshire, with disadvantaged pupils being much less likely to pass GCSE English and Maths and progress to higher education. To address this local educational inequality, the University of Oxford is looking to deliver character-cultivating, co-curricular programmes to local school students. This endeavour aligns with the University's newfound commitment to supporting its local community. This endeavour also aligns with SDG 3.4, which promotes mental health and well-being, and SDG 4.7, which promotes ethical and global citizenship. In this pilot study, we aimed to identify the character strengths that these co-curricular programmes should focus on cultivating. To achieve this aim, we built upon the VIA Youth Framework and existing character education literature, adopting both an engaged scholarship and mixed-methods approach, which consisted of a self-administered questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Whilst our findings are only preliminary, they suggest that these programmes should focus on cultivating the following six character strengths: leadership, perseverance, judgement, self-regulation, social intelligence and teamwork. A similar, most robust study on a larger sample would allow more conclusive results to be determined.

Introduction

Educational inequality is a significant issue in Oxfordshire. Only 21.4% of Oxfordshire students on free school meals¹ progress to higher education by age 19, in contrast to 48% of their peers (Oxford Hub, no date, citing Department for Education, 2023). Furthermore, only 8% of students who do not meet the expected reading, writing and maths targets at Key Stage 2 pass GCSE² English and Maths (Oxford Hub, no date, citing Farquharson, McNally, and Tahir, 2022).

One way the University of Oxford aims to address this local educational inequality is by delivering character-cultivating, co-curricular programmes to local school students. This endeavour is part of the University's recent commitment to serving the local community as demonstrated by Vice-Chancellor Irene Tracey, who has stated that the University 'has a duty to support the community in which it lives, and to work in partnership with it' (Tracey, no date). This endeavour will also advance SDG 3.4, which promotes mental health and well-being (United Nations, no date a), and SDG 4.7, which promotes ethical and global citizenship (United Nations, no date b).

Integrating character education into these co-curricular programmes in an 'intentional, planned, organised and reflective' way (The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022) has the potential to maximise the positive impact they could have on the local school students. Cultivating character has been positively associated with well-being (Proyer *et al.*, 2015) and suggested to be an essential contributor to human flourishing, alongside competencies or skills (Crossan *et al.*, 2024; The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022). Moreover, both legislation and official documents written by the Department for Education recognise character development as an essential aspect of education. For example, section 78 of the Education Act (UK Parliament, 2002) states that schools have a 'statutory duty' to facilitate the 'spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society'. The Department for Education (2019) also stated that 'education for character is ... integral to the work of excellent schools'.

In this pilot study, we aimed to identify which character strengths these co-curricular programmes should focus on cultivating, considering the context-specific character needs of local school students. To accomplish this, we set out to achieve three main research objectives. Our first research objective was to identify the signature and lesser strengths of the local school students. Our second and third research objectives were to identify further criteria and contextual information that would be important to consider when selecting the character strengths these co-curricular programmes should focus on. However, due to time constraints and a lack of participation and engagement, we were unable to collect sufficient data to reach definitive conclusions. Hence, we present this study as a pilot and our findings are preliminary.

¹ In the UK, school students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are provided with healthy school meals that are free of charge and covered by the government (Department for Education, 2025). For more specific criteria for which students are entitled to free school meals, please see Department for Education (2025)

² GCSE stands for General Certificate of Secondary Education. GCSEs are academic qualifications taken by school students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Most school students will typically take GCSEs in various subjects between the ages of 14 and 16.

In the following sections, we start with an overview of character and character education. We then explore various schools of thought about how to select the character strengths that character education interventions should cultivate. Following this overview, we present our methods, results and discussion insights, including key limitations and recommendations for future researchers.

Character Overview

Character is an interconnected suite of cognitive, emotional and behavioural habits that are embodied and virtuous (Crossan *et al.*, 2017, citing Bright *et al.*, 2006 and Moore, 2005; Crossan *et al.*, 2024). The habits that make up character are 'virtuous insofar as they collectively influence judgement and human flourishing' (Crossan *et al.*, 2024). In other words, these virtuous habits dispose one to think, feel, or act 'at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way' (Crossan *et al.*, 2017, citing Bright *et al.*, 2006 and Moore, 2005; Lamb, Brant and Brooks, 2021, citing Aristotle, 1999, 1106b22-23, 1109a20-b7, cf. 1106a16-1109a19). The term 'virtue' describes the higher-order habits of cognition, emotion and behaviour that are core to one's character. Some examples of virtues are wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Virtues are ubiquitous and highly valued across different cultures, traditions and historical periods (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). The term character strength describes the lower-order habits of cognition, emotion and behaviour that make up one's character. Some examples of character strengths include curiosity, perseverance, kindness, fairness, humility and hope. Character strengths can be considered distinct psychological ingredients, pathways, processes and /or mechanisms that enable the display of virtues (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Character's cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions can be 'observed, assessed and developed' (Crossan *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, character is universal and reflexive to context (Crossan *et al.*, 2024).

A person's character profile will include signature and lesser character strengths (Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Proyer *et al.*, 2015). Signature character strengths are essential to who one is as a person, and feel natural and effortless when they enact the strength. These character strengths, when used, uplift and leave one feeling happy, in balance and ready to take on more (Niemeiec, no date). Signature strengths are usually, but not always, the strongest or most prominent strengths in one's character profile (Niemeiec, no date; VIA, no date a). For more detailed criteria on what constitutes a signature strength, please refer to Peterson and Seligman (2004, p. 18). Contrastingly, lesser character strengths have 'comparatively lower expressions' in one's character profile (Proyer *et al.*, 2015).

One can think of vices as the antithesis of virtues and character strengths. Contrasting to virtues and character strengths, vices are embodied habits of cognition, emotion and behaviour that dispose one to think, feel or act 'at the wrong times, about the wrong things, toward the wrong people, for the wrong end, or in the wrong way' (Crossan *et al.*, 2017, citing Bright *et al.*, 2006 and Moore, 2005; Lamb, Brant and Brooks, 2021, citing Aristotle, 1999, 1106b22-23, 1109a20-b7; cf. 1106a16-1109a19). Vices arise as a result of character strengths and virtues becoming in excess, deficiency or imbalance with other character strengths and virtues (Crossan *et al.*, 2017, citing Aristotle, 1999, 1106a26b28; Crossan *et al.*, 2024, citing Arthur *et al.*, 2021; Bright *et al.*, 2014, Snow, 2020). For example, a lack of humility to balance drive and courage may result in obsessive perfectionism that can lead to chronic anxiety, stress and compromised performance (Crossan *et al.*, 2024).

Character Education Overview

Character education refers to all explicit and implicit educational interventions that help cultivate people's character strengths and virtues (The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022). Implicit character education interventions involve character being caught through role modelling (Lamb, Brant and Brooks, 2021; The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022). In contrast, explicit character education interventions involve teaching character and providing individuals with the rationale, language, and tools to develop their character (The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022). One of the ultimate goals of most character education interventions is to nurture individuals to become intrinsically motivated to develop their character (The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022). In other words, most character education interventions aim to nurture individuals to seek character freely, as a means to pursue a better life (The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022).

It is critical to note that character education has garnered widespread concern. One primary concern of character education is that, if it is not implemented correctly, character education could have a negative impact on students. For example, the character education intervention implemented by the US Department of Education in 84 schools has significant negative effects on students' empathy, positive social behaviour and engagement with learning (US Department of Education, 2010). The fact that previous character education research and interventions contained a bias towards right-wing politics has also raised concern about character education (Aspray, 2023). For instance, one of the most prominent advocates of character education is US President Bill Clinton, who supported character education to 'preserve ... traditional values' and to fight alleged 'social evils' such as 'out-of-wedlock birth' (Clinton, 1995). Another concern is that the individualisation of ethics through character education may result in leaders becoming more reluctant to implement significant systemic and structural changes within organisations and societies (Jerome and Kisby, 2019). These concerns serve as a warning that the design and implementation of any character education intervention should undergo empirical testing and scrutiny.

Selecting Character Strengths for Character Education Interventions to Cultivate

In this section, we review two schools of thought for selecting the character strengths that character education interventions cultivate. We first review various schools of thought about the number of character strengths an intervention should focus on cultivating. We then review various schools of thought about how to select the character strengths that character education interventions should cultivate. Considering this information, we then outline the criteria we adopted for choosing the character strengths that the co-curricular programmes the University wants to deliver should focus on.

Various schools of thought exist about the number of character strengths an intervention should focus on cultivating. Whilst one's overall character is both universal and context-specific, some authors argue that the virtues and character strengths that comprise character are essentially universal, with little to no sociocultural variation (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Hence, previous scholars have attempted to compile lists of these universal virtues and character strengths that are as 'exhaustive' and 'exclusive' as possible (Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Ray *et al.*, 2022). The publication of these lists raises the question of whether a character education intervention should attempt to cultivate all the items presented in these lists, or just a select few.

Previous authors have stated that it is much easier for a character education intervention to focus on cultivating a few, well-selected character strengths compared to an entire suite (Lamb, Brant and Brooks, 2021; The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, no date, p. 11). This sentiment is particularly pertinent to co-curricular and extra-curricular character education interventions, considering the limited time participants will spend participating in them compared to their formal education and jobs (Lamb, Brant and Brooks, 2021).

To prevent character strengths and virtues from turning into vices, interventions that focus only on a select few character strengths may benefit from adopting a couple of the following approaches (Crossan *et al.*, 2017, citing Aristotle, 1999, 1106a26b28; Crossan *et al.*, 2024, citing Arthur *et al.*, 2021; Bright *et al.*, 2014, Snow, 2020). Focusing on cultivating only a few character strengths may result in some character strengths becoming excessive, deficient or imbalanced by other character strengths. In this way, focusing on cultivating only a select few character strengths may cause some of the participants' character strengths and virtues to become vices (Crossan *et al.*, 2017, citing Aristotle, 1999, 1106a26b28; Crossan *et al.*, 2024, citing Arthur *et al.*, 2021; Bright *et al.*, 2014, Snow, 2020). Balancing the character needs of the overall group with individual needs is one approach that interventions focusing on only a select few character strengths could adopt to prevent character strengths and virtues from becoming vices. A second approach that these interventions could adopt is to remind participants of the importance of cultivating other character strengths that interact with and balance those focused on in the programmes (Crossan *et al.*, 2024).

Various schools of thought exist on how to select few character strengths that a character education intervention focuses on cultivating also exist. The first school of thought this study considered is that interventions should focus on cultivating participants' signature and/or lesser strengths. The second school of thought considered in this study is that interventions should focus on cultivating character strengths that meet other context-specific criteria. For example, an intervention may focus on cultivating character strengths that are tailored to participants' age and the form of intervention. Another important criterion to consider in the context of co-curricular programmes specifically is choosing character strengths that are relevant to the co-curriculars themselves.

Some scholars have proposed the benefits of extra-curricular character education interventions focusing on cultivating participants' signature and/or lesser strengths. For example, Proyer *et al.* (2015) found that people who report higher levels of character strengths benefited more from developing their lesser strengths than their signature strengths. However, they found that people who reported lower levels of strengths benefited more from developing their signature strengths than their lesser strengths. Additionally, Haidt (2002, cited in Proyer *et al.*, 2015) suggested that programmes which focus on signature strengths first then lesser strengths can be more enjoyable than those which concentrate on lesser strengths first then signature strengths. Lamb, Brant and Brooks (2021) suggest the benefits of cultivating character strengths that meet other, context-specific criteria. For example, Lamb, Brant and Brooks (2021) used other, context-specific criteria to inform the Oxford Global Leadership Initiative, a leadership-centred extra-curricular programme for postgraduates. Lamb, Brant and Brooks (2021) tailored the selection criteria they used to the context of an extra-curricular programme and the 'emerging adulthood' phase of life the participants were experiencing as 18-29 year olds.

The tailored criteria that Lamb, Brant and Brooks (2021) used are as follows: to cultivate character strengths that are morally admirable (Henceforth, referred to as the *Moral* character goal); to cultivate character strengths that would help the students deal with the real-life challenges they face at their current age (Henceforth, referred to as the *Current Challenges*

character goal); to cultivate character strengths that would help the students be wise and effective leaders (Henceforth, referred to as the *Leadership* character goal); to cultivate character strengths that would help the students face future challenges and be effective in their future roles (Henceforth, referred to as the *Future Challenges* goal); to cultivate character strengths that the students might not naturally develop through their normal lives, outside of the programme; and to cultivate character strengths that would encourage the students to think and act beyond their own needs and contribute positively to wider communities and societies (Henceforth, referred to as the *Civic* character goal).

Another important consideration when selecting the character strengths these co-curricular programmes focus on is their relevance to the co-curricular activities themselves. Lamb, Brant and Brooks (2021) suggested that they selected character strengths that are important for wise and effective leadership because the Oxford GLI is a leadership-centred co-curricular. In other words, they wanted to choose character strengths that were relevant to the programme. From this, we infer that it is important for the character strengths we select to be relevant to the type of co-curricular the University wants to deliver. For example, if the University wants to deliver a football co-curricular, perseverance and teamwork may be more relevant and better to focus on than creativity. Identifying the character strengths that are relevant to different co-curricular activities would require further literature review and insight from experts in those fields (e.g., football coaches). When undertaking this research, we did not know which co-curriculars the University would be looking to deliver, so we could not consider this criterion within our pilot study.

Informed by the literature, we aligned our study with the following schools of thought. To begin with, considering the limited time that local Oxfordshire students would spend participating in these University-led co-curricular programmes, we decided it would be best for these co-curricular programmes to focus on cultivating a select few character strengths, rather than an entire suite. To determine the select few character strengths these programmes should focus on, we incorporated the perspectives of two other schools of thought, discussed earlier. Firstly, we designed our study to identify students' signature and lesser strengths. Secondly, we designed our study to also identify the character strengths that meet several context-specific criteria. To derive these context-specific criteria, we asked participants to rank the importance of several context-specific criteria that we derived from Lamb, Brant and Brooks (2021) and suggest their own. Asking participants to rank the importance of these context-specific criteria would help us identify those which were most important. This information would be particularly useful if we found that no character strengths meet all or most of these context-specific selection criteria. Through collecting data informed by both of these schools of thought, we aimed to identify character strengths that not only meet important context-specific criteria, but also are the students' signature and/or lesser strengths. Considering both schools of thought, instead of just one, would allow us to more strongly justify the final list of character strengths we propose these programmes should focus on. However, it is important to acknowledge the risks associated with interventions that focus on only cultivating a select few character strengths and to implement measures to mitigate them, as discussed earlier in this section.

Methods

Approaches

We employed a mixed-methods approach to identify the character strengths that these co-curricular programmes should focus on cultivating. Our mixed-methods approach consisted of semi-structured interviews with teachers and a self-administered questionnaire on Microsoft Forms for teachers and parents/guardians to complete. Our self-administered questionnaire consisted of closed questions, with an option for respondents to elaborate on their answers towards the end of the survey. The semi-structured interviews we conducted complemented the questionnaire by asking participants to elaborate on questions similar to those in the survey. By asking participants to elaborate on their answers, we aimed to gain valuable insights that our survey may not have captured. We adopted this approach to our semi-structured interviews from Crossan et al. (2017), who had participants complete a self-administered questionnaire and asked them to explain their answers after each question.

Throughout our study, we also adopted an 'engaged scholarship' approach, also used by Crossan et al. (2017). 'Engaged scholarship' is a 'participative form of research for obtaining the advice and perspectives of key stakeholders ... to understand a complex social problem' (Van de Ven, 2007, p. iX). Van de Ven (2007, p. 34) has championed this approach as one that can enhance the rigour and relevance of social science research to the communities it serves. Previous research also suggests the importance of adopting an engaged scholarship approach within the field of character education itself. For example, Döring et al. (2024, citing Schwartz, 1992) argue that character education should 'give a voice to educators', as they interpret and promote values in meaningful ways. Values are interpreted and promoted not only by teachers, but also by parents and the wider community (Lamb, Brant and Brooks, 2021; The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022). Hence, we infer that it is important to consider the perspectives of teachers, parents and other important members of the students' communities in the development of these programmes. Adopting an 'engaged scholarship' approach, also aligns our study to SDG target goals 10.2, which focuses on empowering and promoting the social, economic and political inclusion of all (United Nations, no date c); 16.7, which aims to ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels (United Nations, no date d); and 17.17, which involves encouraging and promoting effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships (United Nations, no date e).

Presenting Participants with the *VIA Youth Framework*

To support participants while answering the relevant questions in the questionnaire and interviews, we asked them to review the *VIA Youth 24 Character Strengths with Descriptions* document (VIA, no date b) (henceforth, the *VIA Youth Framework*). The *VIA Youth Framework* presents a list of character strengths and descriptions adapted from Peterson and Seligman (2004). One of the reasons we chose this framework was that it uses language that is tailored and relevant to youth. Additionally, the *VIA Framework* of virtues and character strengths is perhaps one of the most prominent character frameworks that exists (Ray et al., 2022). For further reasons why we chose the *VIA Youth Framework*, please see *Appendix Item I*.

Participant Recruitment and Outreach

We reached out to teachers, parents and guardians through contacting 77 local schools and then 63 holiday playschemes. To do so, we used the Oxfordshire County Council website, school websites and ChatGPT create the database of all local primary schools and holiday schemes. We contacted schools and holiday playschemes using standardised email templates, which also provided recipients with an additional template to send to teachers, parents and guardians. Semi-structured interviews were organised through email and in-person communication. The interview with interviewee A was conducted on Microsoft Teams. The rest of the interviews were conducted in person at the interviewees' respective schools.

Self-Administered Questionnaire

We designed the first part of our self-administered questionnaire to achieve our third research objective of identifying relevant contextual information. In this part of the questionnaire, participants were asked to state the year group(s) of the student(s) they reflected on and the school(s) they attended. Asking these questions would allow us to assess the representativeness of our sample, and compare responses by school, region and students' age. Comparing our data by school and region would be important, given that different schools and regions would have different pre-existing character education interventions. Comparing our data by age would also be important, given that 'young people will exhibit different virtues at different stages of their moral development' (Kristjánsson, 2013).

We designed the second part of our questionnaire to identify the signature and/or lesser strengths of the local school students in Oxfordshire. In this part of the questionnaire, participants were asked to reflect on their own five most developed and least developed character strengths, as well as those of the student(s) they reflected on. For these questions, participants were invited to select character strengths from the *VIA Youth Framework* and state any other character strengths they could think of that were also applicable. To make this part of the survey more accessible, we used the terms 'most developed' and 'least developed' character strengths to refer to signature and lesser strengths, respectively. Participants were first asked to reflect on their own most and least developed character strengths. The signature and lesser strengths of teachers, parents and guardians would likely influence the students' character through role modelling. (Lamb, Brant and Brooks, 2021; The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022). Hence, the signature and lesser strengths of teachers and parents/guardians may indicate which character strengths are more or less likely to be cultivated beyond these programmes. Thus, asking participants to reflect on their own character helped us achieve our third research objective of identifying important contextual information. Participants were then asked to select what they thought were the five most and least developed character strengths of the student(s) they were reflecting on. Asking participants this question helped us achieve our first research objective of identifying the local students' signature and lesser strengths.

We designed the third part of our questionnaire to achieve our second research objective of identifying further criteria for selecting the character strengths that these programmes should focus on. In this part of our questionnaire, participants were asked to engage with character goals that we derived from the criteria used in Lamb, Brant and Brooks (2021). Participants were first asked which character strengths they thought would help the student(s) they reflected on deal with the challenges they currently faced, face future challenges and be effective in their future roles. Participants were also asked which character strengths they thought their student(s) might not naturally develop through their everyday life. Again, participants were invited to

select character strengths from the *VIA Youth Framework* and state any other character strengths they could think of that were also applicable. Participants were then asked to rank how important they thought the various character goals that we derived from the criteria used in Lamb, Brant and Brooks (2021) were. Following this, participants were asked to select which of these character goals they actually believed were important for these programmes to have. Asking participants to both rank and select character goals would allow us to distinguish the lowest-ranked goals from those they thought were unimportant. Participants were also invited to suggest other character goals that they thought were important for these programmes to have.

We designed the fourth part of our questionnaire to invite participants to elaborate on their responses to earlier questions and indicate their interest in staying informed about our research.

Semi-Structured Interviews

We designed our semi-structured interviews to complement our questionnaire, adopting a similar approach to Crossan et al. (2017) in phase one, step two of their research. In this part of their research, Crossan et al. (2017) had participants complete a self-administered questionnaire and asked them to explain their answers after each question. Similarly, during the semi-structured interviews, we asked participants similar questions to those in our survey, encouraging them to elaborate on and explain their answers. Participants were first asked which character strengths they thought their school has been and or continues to cultivate effectively, and why. We asked this question as a proxy for asking participants what they believed were the signature strengths of their students and why. We then presented participants with the same character goals we provided in our survey. We asked participants to state which character goals they thought these co-curricular programmes should include and why. Participants often discussed which character strengths they believed met these goals during their answers as well. After this, we asked participants to identify which character strengths they thought would match the context-specific character goals we provided and explain why (for these context-specific character goals, please see the *Self-Administered Questionnaire* section).

Analytical Strategy

Questionnaire responses were analysed using frequency counts and weighted scoring. For questions that asked participants to select specific character strengths or goals from a provided list, we manually analysed the results using Microsoft Excel to determine the number of different participants that selected each strength or goal. For the question that asked participants to rank the importance of different character goals from a provided list, results were analysed using Microsoft Forms' in-built weighted scoring system. In this weighted scoring system, items with higher rankings received more points than items with lower rankings. The total and average score for each item was then calculated, aggregating participants' answers to produce an overall ranking of all the items. We then used R, an open-source coding software, to process and visualise our data. With R, we identified the context-specific character goals that the majority of participants agreed were essential for these programmes to have. Additionally, we identified the character strengths that the majority of participants reported would align with these context-specific character goals. We also identified the character strengths that the majority of participants reported were one of the five most developed or least developed strengths of their student(s). After this analysis, we used R to assess any overlap between the character strengths that met these different criteria. We visualised our findings with grouped bar graphs and Venn diagrams.

Interviews were transcribed manually and then analysed through emergent thematic coding. We used the following eight codes were used to analyse the interviews: social skills and communication; self-motivation and regulation; motivation for learning; moral and good character; contribution to society; barriers to implementation; leadership skills; and skills to face future challenges. We chose these code words because they captured patterns that emerged across the interviews. Additionally, when applicable, mentions of each code were further coded as 'positive' or 'negative'. For every code, we recorded the number of times each interviewee mentioned them and the total number of times they were mentioned across interviews.

Ethics

We took some measures to make sure our study was as ethical as possible. For example, we assured participants that their responses would remain anonymous at the beginning of the questionnaire and in our emails to them. Additionally, near the end of the questionnaire, we invited participants to indicate their interest in staying informed about how their responses are used.

Results

In this section of the paper, we present the results obtained from our self-administered questionnaire and then those collected from the semi-structured interviews. Only six questionnaire responses were collected in this study (five from one school, one from a different school) and only four interviews were conducted, each with a teacher from a different school. Due to the small sample size and the non-response bias present in this study, it is unlikely that our findings are representative of the entire population of local school students in Oxfordshire. Hence, these findings should be viewed as preliminary only.

Results from the Self-Administered Questionnaire

To answer our first research objective—identifying the signature and lesser strengths of local school students in Oxfordshire—we asked participants to select the five most and least developed character strengths of their student(s). Two character strengths were selected by the majority of participants as one of the five most developed strengths of the student(s) they reflected on: creativity (5 out of 6 participants; 83%) and humour (4 out of 6 participants; 67%). Perseverance was the only character strength selected by the majority of participants as one of the five least developed character strengths of their student(s) (4 out of 6 participants; 67%). *Figure 1* summarises these results.

To answer our second research objective—identifying further, context-specific criteria for selecting the character strengths that these co-curricular programmes should focus on—we asked participants to review a list of character goals we derived from Lamb, Brant, and Brooks (2021). Participants were asked to select which character goals they thought these programmes should include and also rank them in order of importance. The *Current Challenges* goal was ranked as the most important character goal, followed by the goal of cultivating strengths that students might not naturally develop; the *Future Challenges* goal; the *Civic* goal; the *Moral* goal; and the *Leadership* goal. Complementing this ranking, all six participants (100%) selected the *Current Challenges* goal, the *Future Challenges* goal and the goal of

cultivating strengths that students might not naturally develop as goals these programmes should have. *Figure 2* summarises these results.

To answer our third research objective—identifying other important contextual information to consider when selecting the character strengths that these programmes should focus on—we asked participants to select which character goals they thought met the *Current Challenges* goal, the *Future Challenges* goal and the goal of cultivating strengths that their student(s) might not naturally develop. Social intelligence was selected by the most participants as a character strength that would meet the *Current Challenges* goal (6 out of 6 participants; 100%), followed by bravery, judgement and perseverance (5 out of 6 participants; 83%); and kindness, self-regulation and teamwork (4 out of 6 participants; 67%). Perseverance, social intelligence and teamwork were selected by the most participants as character strengths that would meet the *Future Challenges* goal (6 out of 6 participants; 100%), followed by leadership and self-regulation (5 out of 6 participants; 83%); and judgement and perspective (4 out of 6 participants; 67%). Leadership was selected by the most participants as a character strength that would meet the goal of cultivating strengths that students might not naturally develop (4 out of 6 participants; 67%). *Figure 3* summarises these results.

We used the results summarised in *Figures 1, 2 and 3* to assess the overlap between the character strengths that the majority of participants selected as one of the five most developed strengths of their student(s); as one of the five least developed strengths of their student(s); and as meeting the context-specific character goals they agreed these programmes should have (the *Current Challenges* goal, the *Future Challenges* goal and the goal of cultivating strengths that their student(s) might not naturally develop). Leadership was selected by the majority of participants to meet both the *Future Challenges* goal and the goal of cultivating strengths that their student(s) might not naturally develop. Four character strengths were selected by the majority of participants to meet both the *Current Challenges* and *Future Challenges* goal: judgement, self-regulation, social intelligence and teamwork. Perseverance was selected by the majority of participants as not only meeting the *Current Challenges* and *Future Challenges* goal, but also as one of the five least developed strengths of their student(s). None of the character strengths identified by the majority of participants as one of the five most developed strengths of their student(s) met any of the context-specific character goals they agreed these programmes should have. *Figures 4a and 4b* summarise these results.

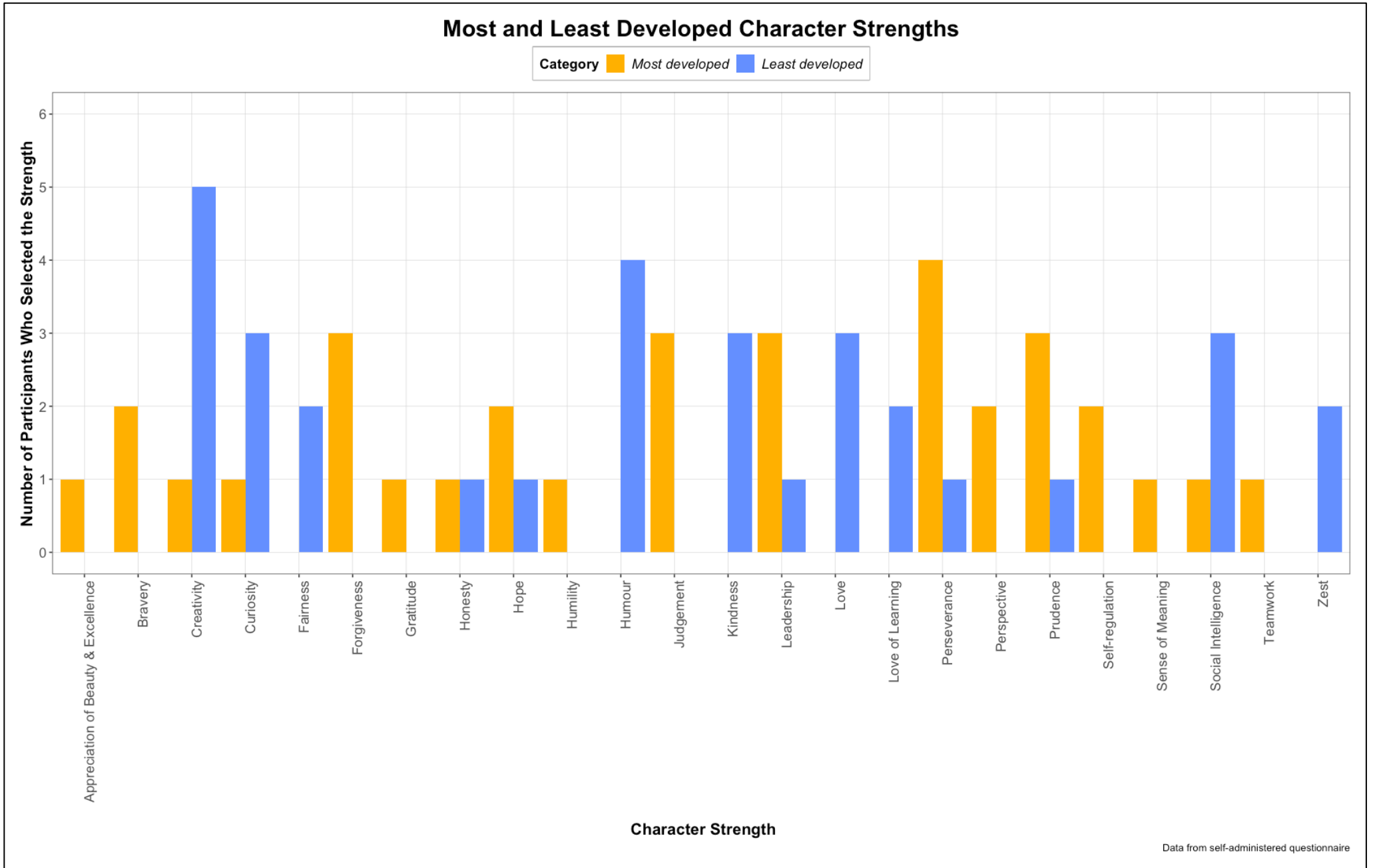


Figure 1: The Most and Least Developed Character Strengths | A grouped bar graph displaying the number of participants that selected each of the 24 VIA Youth character strengths as one of the most or least developed strengths of their student(s). | n = 6

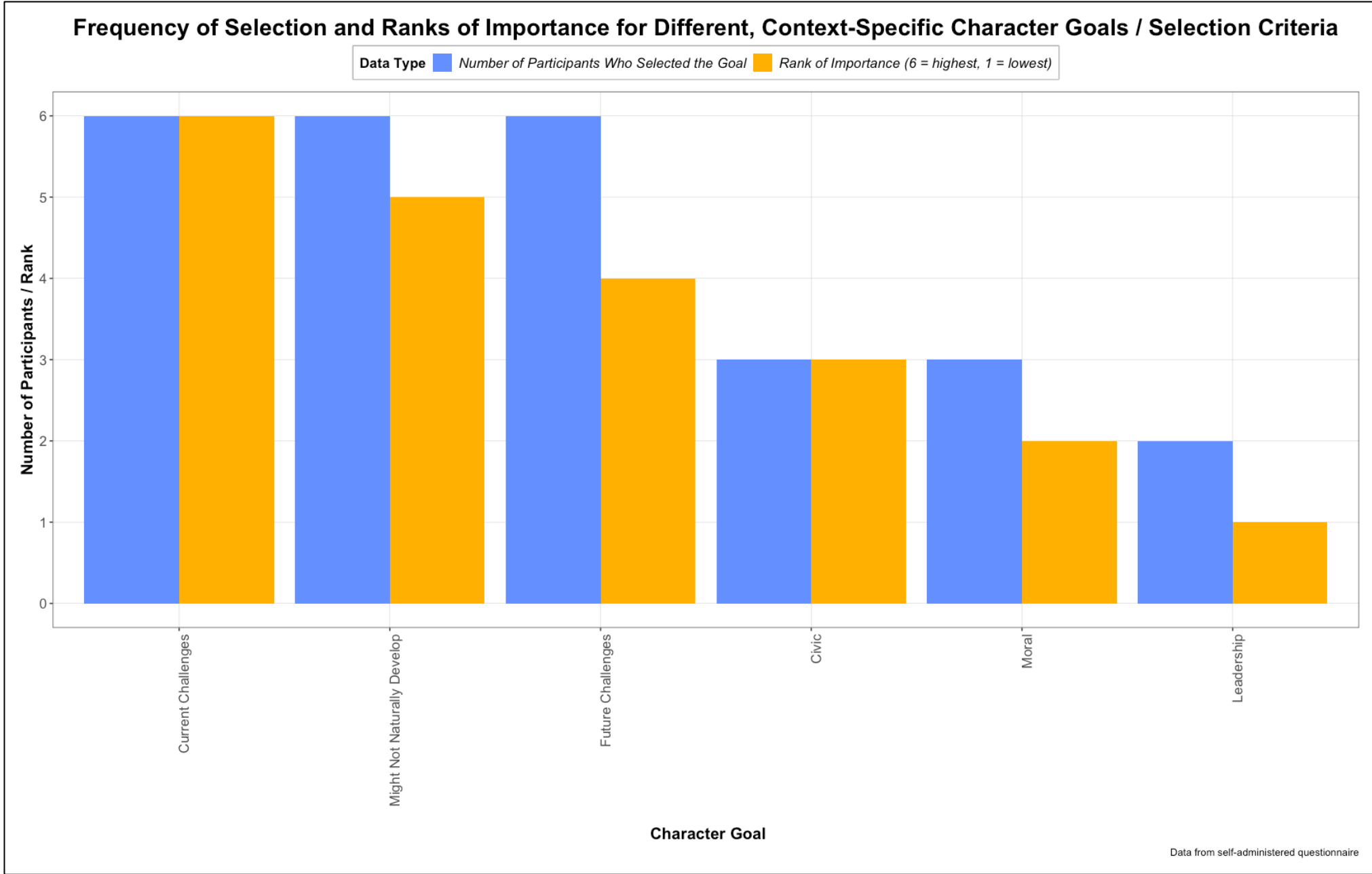
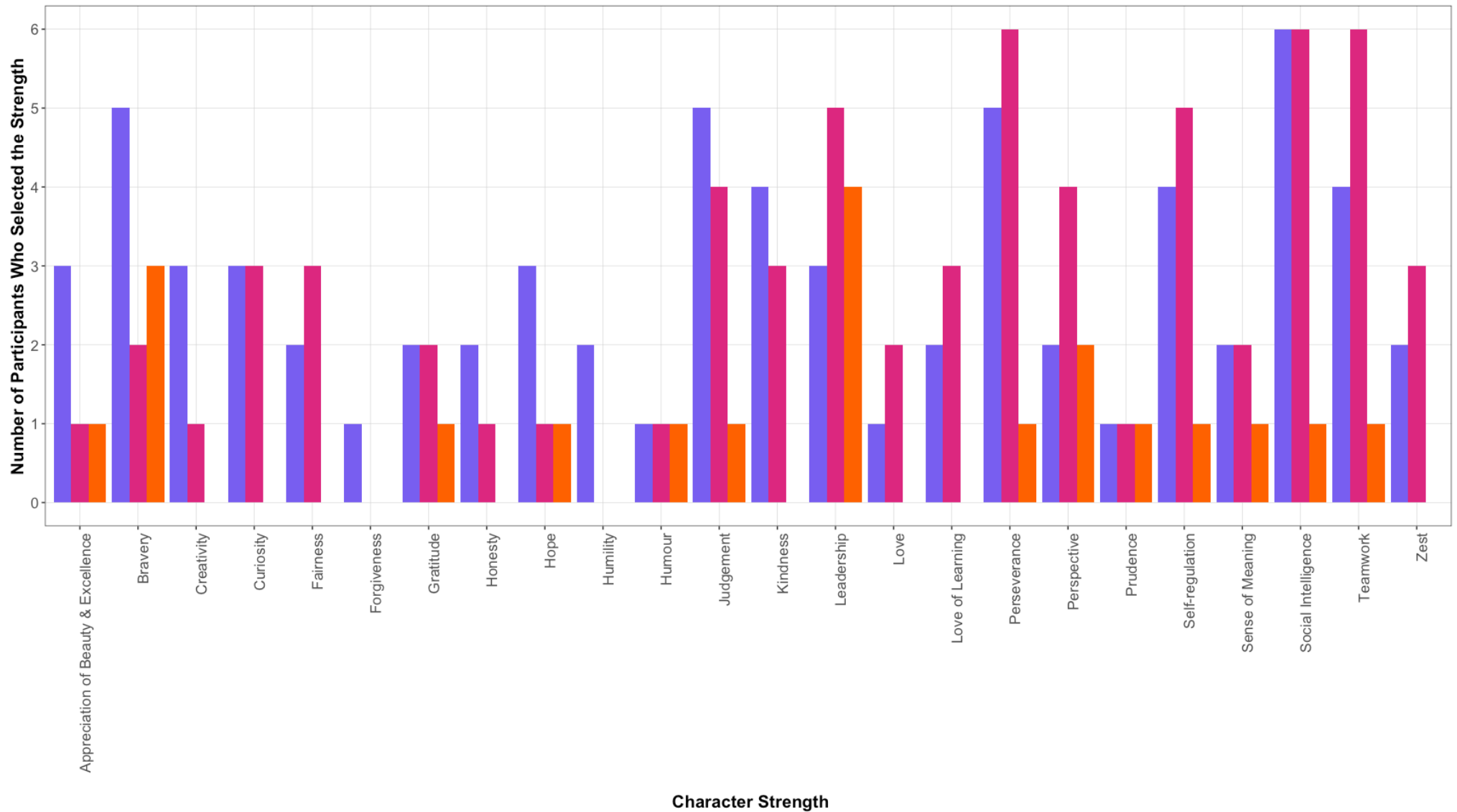


Figure 2: The Frequency of Selection and Ranks of Importance for Different, Context-Specific Character Goals | A grouped bar graph displaying the ranks of importance and number of participants that selected each of the six context-specific character goals we derived from Lamb, Brant and Brooks (2021) as goals these programmes should have | n = 6

Character Strengths That Meet Different, Context-Specific Character Goals / Selection Criteria

Context-Specific Character Goal ■ Current challenges ■ Future challenges ■ Strengths that might not naturally be developed



Data from self-administered questionnaire

Figure 3: Character Strengths That Meet Different, Context-Specific Character Goals | A grouped bar graph displaying the number of participants that selected each of the 24 VIA Youth character strengths as meeting three context-specific character goals we derived from Lamb, Brant and Brooks (2021) | n = 6

Overlap of the Most Developed and Context-Specific Character Strengths

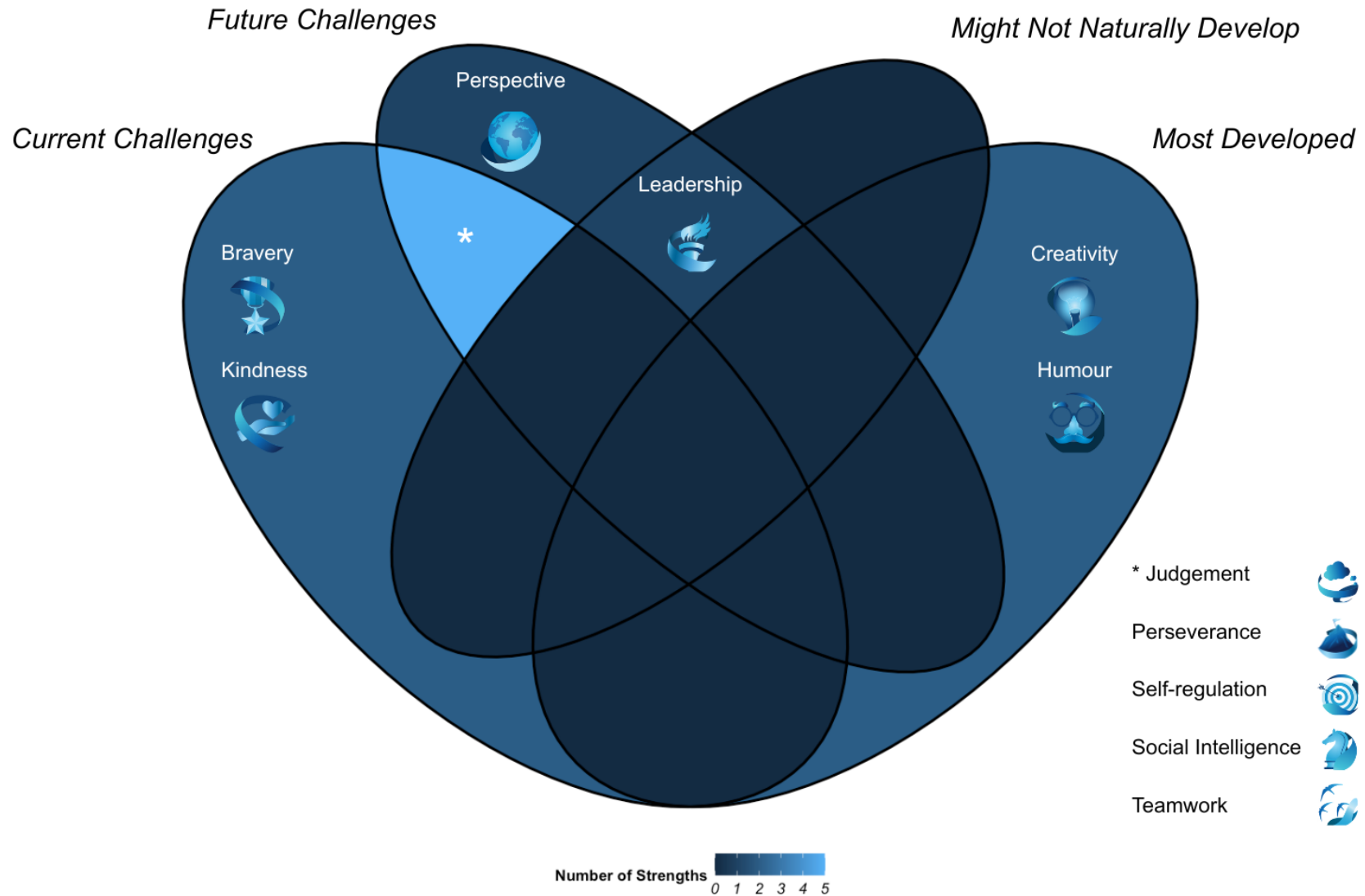


Figure 4a: The Overlap Between the Most Developed and Context-Specific Character Strengths | A Venn diagram displaying the overlap between the character strengths that the majority of participants (4 out of 6; 67%) selected as being one of the five most developed strengths of their student(s) and those that they selected as meeting the three, context-specific character goals they agreed these programmes should have | n = 6

Overlap of the Least Developed and Context-Specific Character Strengths

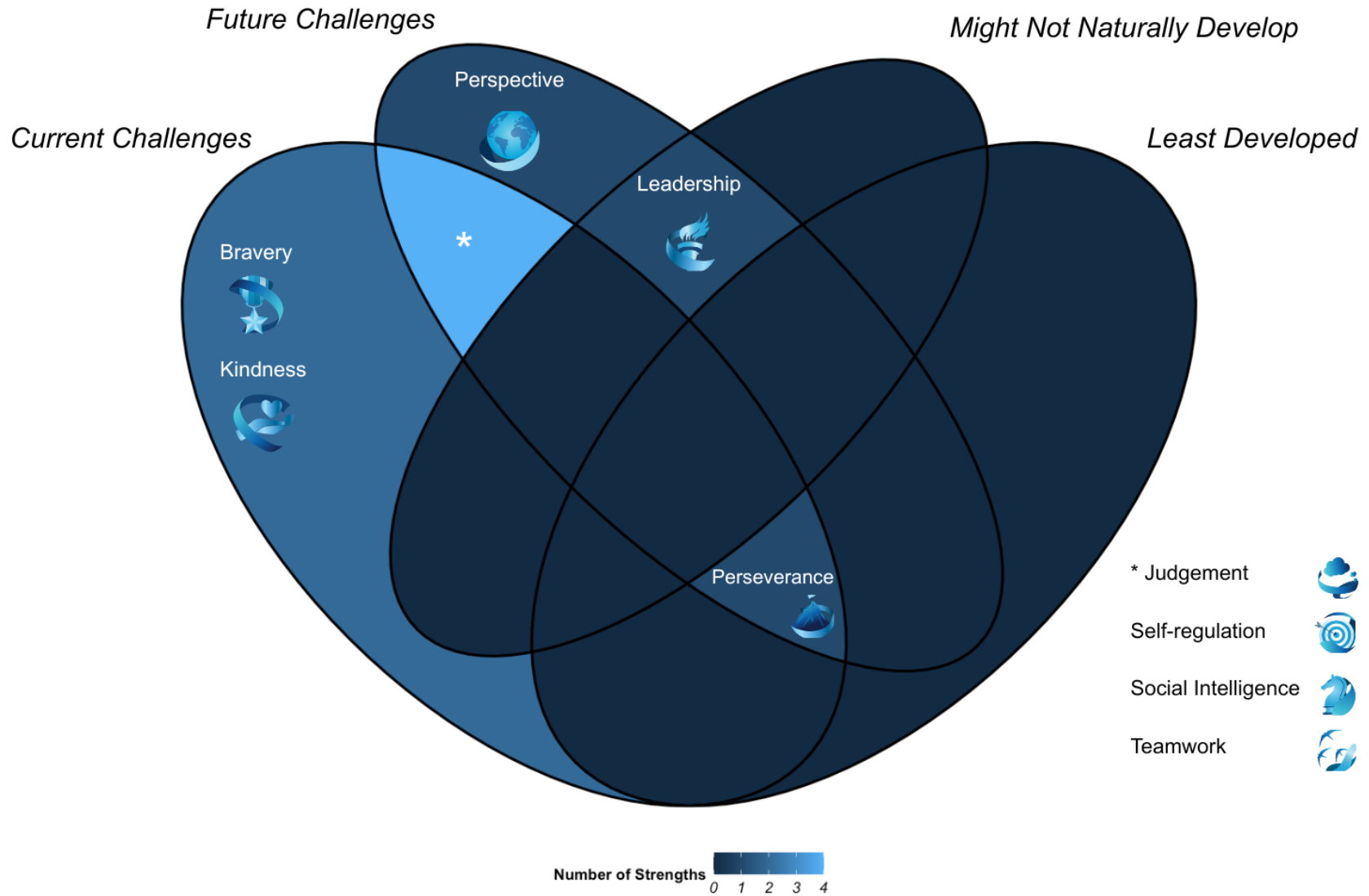


Figure 4b: The Overlap Between the Lost Developed and Context-Specific Character Strengths | A Venn diagram displaying the overlap between the character strengths that the majority of participants (4 out of 6; 67%) selected as being one of the five least developed strengths of their student(s) and those that they selected as meeting the three, context-specific character goals they agreed these programmes should have | n = 6

Results from the Semi-Structured Interviews

Table 1 summarises the number of times that each code we used to process the Interview data was mentioned. *Motivation for Learning* was the most frequently mentioned code, being mentioned 22 times. *Barriers to Implementation* was the least frequently mentioned code, being mentioned only twice. *Moral Character* was the only code that was mentioned more positively than negatively. *Self-Motivation and -Regulation* was the code that was mentioned in the most negative light, with the frequency of negative mentions being 2.3 times greater than positive mentions.

Discussion

In this section, we discuss the insights gained from our semi-structured interviews and self-administered questionnaire. We first discuss the insights from our semi-structured interviews, beginning with the codes that the Interviewees mentioned most frequently. Whilst doing so, we compare some of the insights gained from the interviews with those from the questionnaire. Following this, we discuss two points of intrigue that arose from the questionnaire data. After exploring these points of intrigue, we move on to discussing the list of character strengths the questionnaire data suggests these programmes should potentially focus on. We then discuss some ideas of how these character strengths could be cultivated within the programmes, suggesting a framework and signposting strategies from the literature. Finally, we proceed to discuss the key limitations of our study and recommendations for how future researchers can overcome them.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Insights

Motivation for Learning

A common theme that emerged across interviews was that the students the interviewees reflected on generally lacked ambition to aim for greater goals. Interviewees spoke about the importance of students developing their motivation for learning. Interestingly, Interviewee A mentioned that 'love of learning' is not always something that students naturally develop, especially those who are part of families who 'haven't had a positive experience with school...[and so] don't value education...[, which can] trickle down to the children'. Interviewee A stated that this generational cycle is a reason why they are 'always pushing for...aspirational thinking' in their school. *Motivation for Learning* was the most frequently mentioned code, appearing 22 times overall, with 11 mentions in a positive context and 11 mentions in a negative context.

The Number of Times Each Code Was Mentioned in the Semi-Structured Interviews

Codes	Interviewees				Total	
	A	B	C	D		
Positive motivation for learning	1	5	3	2	11	22
Negative motivation for learning	0	2	5	4	11	
Positive self-motivation and -regulation	2	0	2	2	6	20
Negative self-motivation and -regulation	0	6	6	2	14	
Positive social skills and communication	1	0	3	0	4	14
Negative social skills and communication	0	2	5	3	10	
Positive moral character	0	4	2	0	6	11
Negative moral character	0	5	0	0	5	
Contribution to society	1	3	0	2	6	6
Positive leadership skills	0	0	0	1	1	6
Negative leadership skills	1	1	1	2	5	
Skills to face future challenges	1	1	2	0	4	4
Barriers to implementation	0	2	0	0	2	2
Total	7	31	29	18	85	85

Table 1: The Number of Times Each Code was Mentioned During the Semi-Structured Interviews | $n = 4$

Self-Motivation and -Regulation

Multiple interviewees mentioned instances of their schools actively cultivating self-motivation and self-regulation among their students. For instance, Interviewee A mentioned that they have 'been working a lot of perseverance and resilience... and self-regulation'. However, *Self-Motivation and -Regulation* was the code that was mentioned in the most negative light, with 14 negative mentions overall across three of the four interviews. There were only six positive mentions of *Self-Motivation and -Regulation*. Interviewee B stated that 'managing...feelings and behaviour and self-control has definitely gotten harder for kids'. They also suggested that an increased acceptance of and self-identification with anger and mental issues among both children and adults has resulted in young people becoming 'quite quick to come up with I just can't do it' and not developing the 'built-in resilience or perseverance that maybe was [there] five or ten years ago'. This perspective aligns with the questionnaire data, which revealed that the majority of participants agreed that perseverance was one of the five least developed strengths of their student(s). Interviewee B also mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic and phone use as potential causes of this lack of self-motivation and self-regulation.

Social Skills and Communication

A trend that emerged across three of the four interviews was that the students the interviewees reflected on generally lack social and communication skills. There were 10 negative mentions of *Social Skills and Communication*. Interviewee B suggested potential causes for this lack of social and communication skills, stating that 'children are not naturally [developing social skills] post COVID, especially with mobile phones.' Interviewee B stated that social and communication skills stem from kindness. They also mentioned that their school has been focusing on cultivating both kindness and social skills because they wanted their students 'to be able to function in society'. This desire to cultivate social skills aligns with the questionnaire data, which revealed that all participants agreed that social intelligence was important for meeting the *Future Challenges* goal and the *Current Challenges* goal (both of which all participants agreed were goals these programmes should have).

Leadership Skills

A desire to improve students' leadership skills was a common theme that emerged from all interviews. Out of the six times this code was mentioned, only one mention was positive. This positive mention was made by Interviewee A when discussing how their school is running mini Duke of Edinburgh and Junior Awards to provide their students with leadership opportunities and prepare them for the Bronze, Silver, and Gold Duke of Edinburgh Awards. The five negative mentions of *Leadership Skills* all involved participants describing their students as lacking them. We identified an intriguing contradiction between the interviewees' desire to cultivate their students' leadership skills and the questionnaire participants' ranking the *Leadership* goal as the least important character goal. This contradiction may likely be an artefact of our low sample sizes. This contradiction could also be an artefact of our questionnaire's formatting, which placed the *Leadership* goal as the lowest-ranked character goal before participants had the opportunity to rank the importance of the different goals themselves. Despite ranking the *Leadership* goal as the least important, the majority of participants still agreed that the character strength of leadership was important for these programmes. We can infer this because the majority of questionnaire participants stated that leadership met two other goals that all the participants agreed these programmes should have: the *Future Challenges* goal and the goal of cultivating character strengths that their student(s) might not naturally develop. Hence, both the interview and questionnaire data suggest a preference for these programmes to focus on cultivating leadership.

Moral and Good Character

There were more positive than negative mentions of students' moral character, with the character strength of kindness mentioned across interviews. Interviewees were quick to defend their students' moral character, but often identified issues with their behaviour. This contrast between the stated morality and the behaviour of their students suggests that they might be struggling with what character literature defines as incontinence: when one knows the right thing to do but fails to do it, due to the behavioural dimension of one's character being underdeveloped (Lamb, Brant and Brooks, 2021, citing Aristotle, 1999).

Contribution to Society

Only six mentions of *Contribution to Society* appeared across the interviews. Interviewees placed a high importance on their students developing into positive members of society. In the words of Interviewee B, 'it's not just about getting them that grade at the end. It's about doing all the other stuff that makes sure they're good in society and successful in society'.

Skills to Face Future Challenges

Another common theme that emerged from the interviews was that the Interviewees want their schools to equip students with skills that would help them face future challenges and improve their ability to do so. This desire to prepare students for the future aligns with the questionnaire data, which reveals that all participants selected the *Future Challenges* goal as an important goal for these programmes to have.

Barriers to Implementation

Only Interviewee B mentioned the *Barriers to Implementation* code. Interviewee B discussed the lack of enthusiasm that teachers may have towards character education. They suggested that teachers who are most likely to display this lack of enthusiasm for character education are those who are 'really passionate about their subject, but maybe not so passionate about working with kids'. Interviewee B also said that parents have reduced their emphasis on teaching character to their children, with some beginning to view character education as a role for schools.

Self-Administered Questionnaire: Two Points of Intrigue

One point of intrigue from the questionnaire data is that all six participants selected the *Current Challenges* goal, the *Future Challenges* goal and the goal of cultivating strengths that their student(s) might not naturally develop as important goals for these programmes to have. This observation is intriguing, considering it was only for these three goals that we later asked participants to select character strengths they thought would meet them. We do not believe that any biases in our survey design contributed to this result. We believe this for two reasons. Firstly, we asked participants to select the strengths they thought met these three character goals only after they had engaged with all six character goals. Secondly, when we asked participants to rank the six character goals by importance and select which ones they thought were important for these programmes to include, we did not list these three character goals consecutively. Instead, we shuffled these three character goals amongst the other character goals. Hence, the unanimous agreement for these programmes to focus on the *Current Challenges* goal, the *Future Challenges* goal and the goal of cultivating strengths that their student(s) might not naturally develop suggests the possibility of a strong desire among the wider population for these programmes to meet the context-specific character needs of their school students. As with all the results obtained in this study, this point of intrigue may be an artefact of the low sample size. To confirm if there is a desire among the wider population for these programmes to meet the context-specific character needs of their school student(s), a similar study would need to be conducted, using a much larger sample size.

A second point of intrigue is that participants agreed more strongly on which character strengths fit the context-specific character goals, compared to those that were part of the five most or least developed strengths of their student(s). This result could be explained by the fact that signature and lesser strengths are highly individual and, therefore, more likely to differ from student to student (Niemi, no date; Peterson and Seligman, 2004, p. 18). Contrastingly, the character strengths that meet the context-specific character goals are potentially less likely to differ from student to student, given their shared experiences.

The Character Strengths These Programmes Should Focus On Cultivating: A Preliminary List

The results of the self-administered questionnaire suggest that these co-curricular programmes should potentially focus on cultivating the following character strengths: leadership, perseverance, judgement, self-regulation, social intelligence and teamwork. These six character strengths were selected by the majority of participants (≥ 4 out of 6; $\geq 67\%$) to meet at least two of the three context-specific character goals that they unanimously agreed these programmes should have: the *Current Challenges* goal, the *Future Challenges* goal and the goal of cultivating character strengths that their student(s) might not naturally develop. Additionally, perseverance was selected by the majority of participants as being one of the five least developed character strengths of their student(s). All of the character strengths we propose these programmes should potentially focus on were selected by the majority of participants as either meeting at least two of the context-specific character goals they agreed these programmes should have, or meeting at least one of these context-specific character goals, as well as being one of the five most or least developed strengths of their student(s). By proposing only character strengths that met these two criteria, we sought to align our findings with two major schools of thought in character education and, in turn, provide a more robust justification for our findings.

How to Cultivate the Chosen Character Strengths: Ideas for Implementation

In this section, we discuss some strategies these programmes could implement to cultivate the select few character strengths they focus on.

There is already existing character education literature that discusses strategies for cultivating character. For example, Lamb, Brant and Brooks (2021) describe and elaborate upon seven strategies that the Oxford GLI implemented that are worth considering when designing these co-curricular programmes: habituation through practice; reflection on personal experience; engagement with virtuous exemplars; dialogue that increases virtue literacy; awareness of situational variables; moral reminders; and friendships of mutual accountability. Similarly, the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2022) also provides a collection of strategies in their *Character Teaching Inventory*, some of which could be useful in the context of these co-curricular programmes.

It could also be beneficial for these programmes to cultivate the select few character strengths they intend to focus on through activities that allow students to embrace their signature strengths. As discussed in the *Introduction*, Haidt (2002, cited in Proyer *et al.*, 2015) found that programmes which focused on cultivating signature strengths first, then lesser strengths,

were more enjoyable than those which focused on lesser strengths first, then signature strengths. This evidence suggests that the participants of these co-curricular programmes could find more enjoyment in cultivating the select few strengths the programmes intend to focus on, if they do so through activities that allow them to embrace their signature strengths. For example, in this study, the majority of participants selected creativity and humour as being part of the five most developed strengths of their student(s). However, neither creativity nor humour met any of the context-specific character goals that the majority of participants agreed these programmes should have. Hence, creativity and humour are not part of the preliminary list of six character strengths that this study proposes these co-curricular programmes should focus on (leadership, perseverance, judgement, self-regulation, social intelligence and teamwork). However, the school students participating in these programmes may find more enjoyment in cultivating these six character strengths through activities that allow them to embrace their creativity and humour. For example, participants may find more enjoyment in cultivating these six character strengths through activities such as dance and theatre.

When presenting the character strengths these programmes will focus on cultivating to the school students participating in them, it may be helpful to do so using a framework that places judgement at the centre. Judgement has been ascribed in the character literature to be a 'meta-virtue necessary for good character' (The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022) and the 'key-stone of all virtue' (MacIntyre, 1966, cited in Crossan et al., 2017). Doing so makes sense, given that it is judgement that ultimately allows one to think, feel, or act 'at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way' in different situations (Crossan et al., 2017, citing Bright et al., 2006 and Moore, 2005; Lamb, Brant and Brooks, 2021, citing Aristotle, 1999, 1106b22-23, 1109a20-b7, cf. 1106a16-1109a19). Therefore, regardless of whether judgement met the criteria that we used to select the character strengths these programmes focus on, we would be justified in proposing that these programmes should contextualise the other character strengths relative to judgement. Indeed, Crossan *et al.* (2017) place judgement at the centre of their *Leader Character Framework*. Likewise, in their framework, the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2022) places judgement (which they call practical wisdom) as the final step before the 'Flourishing of Individuals and Society', as its own distinct category of virtue. Similarly, we propose that it would be helpful to present the character strengths these co-curricular programmes focus on in a framework that places judgement at the centre.

Placing judgement at the centre of just five other character strengths could, however, result in the framework becoming misleading. Placing judgement at the centre of just five strengths could result in the framework seeming to be exhaustive when, in fact, there are 18 other character strengths that it does not include. Wrongly perceiving the framework as exhaustive could risk the school students participating in these programmes becoming overly concentrated on cultivating only the select few strengths the programmes focus on. As discussed in the *Introduction*, focusing too much on cultivating only a select few character strengths could cause imbalance amongst one's character strengths. This imbalance could, in turn, cause one's character strengths to become vices of excess or deficiency (Crossan *et al.*, 2017, citing Aristotle, 1999, 1106a26b28; Crossan *et al.*, 2024, citing Arthur *et al.*, 2021; Bright *et al.*, 2014; Snow, 2020). In the *Introduction*, we discussed two strategies that could help prevent these programmes from causing their participants' character strengths to become vices. The first strategy was finding a way to balance individual character needs with those of the group; the second strategy was to remind participants of the importance of cultivating other character strengths that interact with and balance those focused on in the programmes

(Crossan et al., 2024). One way the programmes could implement this second strategy would be by using a more comprehensive framework to present the character strengths that the programmes will focus on to the school students participating in them. This framework would display judgement at the centre of the other 23 *VIA Youth* character strengths and highlight those the programmes will focus on, such as in *Figure 5*.

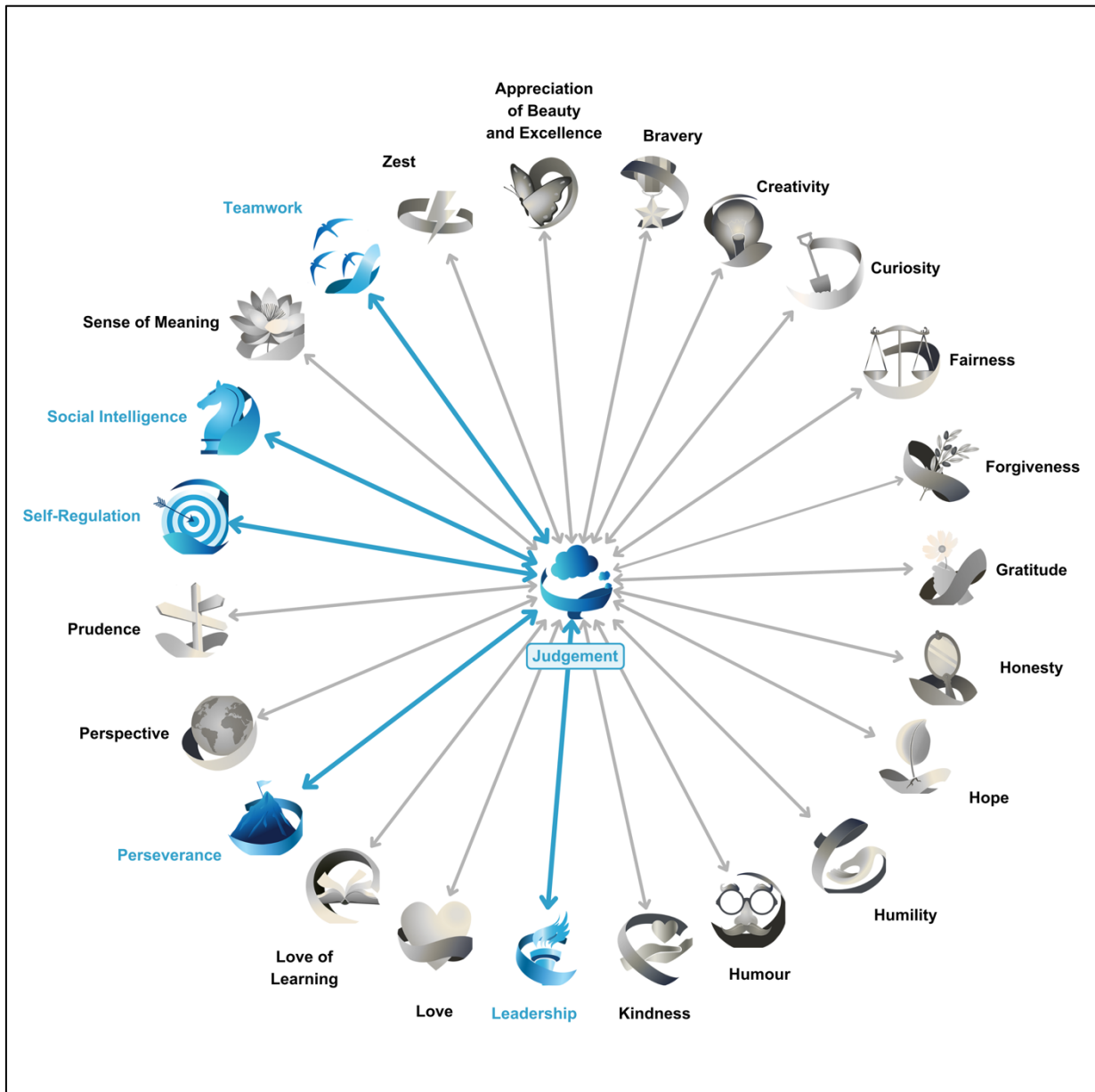


Figure 5: A framework that restructures the 24 *VIA Youth* character strengths, placing judgement at the centre and highlighting the character strengths that these co-curricular programmes should potentially focus on.

Limitations and Recommendations

In this section, we review several factors in our study that limited participant engagement, accuracy and the insights gained, alongside recommendations for how future researchers could overcome them.

Three key factors limited participant engagement within our study. Firstly, we reached out to schools when most had already closed or were about to close within a few days. This unfortunate timing was likely the main reason why we received so few questionnaire responses. Accordingly, we recommend that future researchers to contact and build relationships with schools earlier in the school year. Secondly, we received feedback from some participants and character experts that the formatting and language of our questionnaire was too overwhelming, complex and repetitive, limiting its accessibility. For example, participants were presented with the same list of 24 character strengths at least seven times throughout the questionnaire. One way that future researchers could overcome this formatting limitation is by grouping similar questions together and presenting them in a matrix. Additionally, we recommend that future researchers take more care to present participants with language that is accessible to them. To overcome these limitations in formatting and language, future researchers could conduct a pilot study to gather feedback on how they could improve their engagement with participants, as Crossan *et al.* (2017) did. Thirdly, participant engagement was limited by the fact that we only engaged with teachers, parents and guardians. Future researchers may benefit from triangulating their findings with the perspectives of other individuals who play important roles in students' lives, such as form tutors and SEND leads. Engaging directly with school students would have also helped us more understand their character needs and hopes for these programmes more confidently (Bryman, 2012, p. 386; The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, no date, pp. 15, 17, 21, 74).

Four key factors limited the accuracy of our study. Firstly, we considered only a few studies to inform the character goals and selection criteria that we asked participants to engage with. Hence, the character goals and selection criteria we presented to participants lacked robust justification. We recommend that future researchers conduct a more thorough literature review before determining their selection criteria. Secondly, while parents and guardians were invited to reflect on each child they looked after separately, teachers did not have the option to reflect on students from different year groups separately. To improve the accuracy of teacher responses, we recommend that future researchers provide them with the option to do so. Thirdly, our questionnaire and interviews used the phrase 'most developed character strengths' to refer to signature strengths. This phrase fails to capture other important aspects of what constitutes a signature strength. Hence, we recommend that other researchers looking to identify signature strengths without using a VIA assessment to present participants with an alternative phrase that more accurately captures what signature strengths are, while still being accessible. However, other authors suggest the benefits of cultivating participants' most developed or strongest character strengths over their least developed or deficient character strengths, regardless of whether those most developed strengths fulfil the other aspects that constitute a signature strength (Niemic and Pearce, 2021). Hence, using the phrase 'most developed strength' may not have been significantly detrimental. Fourthly, our questionnaire is not psychometrically validated in identifying the local school students' signature, lesser and overall levels of character strengths. Hence, our questionnaire could not with 100% accuracy identify students' signature or lesser strengths, and determine whether it would be better to focus on the former and/or the latter. If it is possible, we recommend that future researchers

evaluate these qualities using a more reliable, psychometrically validated assessment, such as one of the VIA-Youth assessments (Park and Peterson, 2006; McGrath and Walker, 2016; Ray et al., 2022).

Two key factors limited the insights gained by our study. Firstly, our questionnaire and interviews did not effectively invite participants to suggest their own ideas. None of the survey respondents and interviewees suggested character strengths or character goals that we did not provide them with. To overcome this limitation, we recommend that future researchers invite participants to suggest their own ideas more clearly and frequently. One way future researchers could do so would be by having separate questions that ask participants to suggest any other relevant character strengths or goals they think of. Secondly, our questionnaire did not successfully encourage participants to explain and elaborate on their answers. Participants were only invited to elaborate on their answers towards the end of the questionnaire, which may have been the reason why zero participants reflected on the responses they provided earlier in the questionnaire. To overcome this limitation, we recommend that future researchers provide participants with the option to elaborate on their answers after each question or set of questions. Doing so may make it less overwhelming for participants and increase the likelihood that they will elaborate on and explain the reasoning behind their answers.

Conclusion

To conclude, in this study, we sought to identify the character strengths that the University of Oxford should focus on cultivating in its co-curricular programmes for local school students. To achieve this aim, we adopted an engaged scholarship and mixed-methods approach, inviting participants to complete a self-administered questionnaire or take part in a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire and interviews were designed to help identify the signature and lesser strengths of the local school students, which was our first research objective. The questionnaire and interviews were also designed to identify the context-specific character goals participants believed these programmes should have and the character strengths that meet them, achieving our second and third research objectives. We processed these data to identify the character strengths that met at least one of the two following criteria: the character strength was selected by the majority of participants as meeting at least two of the context-specific character goals they agreed these programmes should have; the character strength was selected by the majority of participants as meeting at least one of these context-specific character goals, as well as being one of the five most or least developed strengths of their student(s). In doing so, we sought to align the preliminary list of character strengths we propose these programmes focus on with two major schools of thought in character education and, in turn, provide a more robust justification for this list. Whilst our findings are only preliminary, they suggest that these programmes should focus on cultivating the following six character strengths: leadership, perseverance, judgement, self-regulation, social intelligence and teamwork. A similar, most robust study on a larger sample would allow more conclusive results to be determined. Once researchers come to more conclusive findings on which character strengths these co-curricular programmes should focus on cultivating, they can begin to determine the best ways to cultivate these character strengths within the programmes themselves, helping to maximise the positive impact these programmes could have.

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VIA (no date b) ‘VIA Youth 24 Character Strengths With Descriptions’. Available at: <https://www.viacharacter.org/resources/activities/via-youth-twenty-four-character-strengths-with-descriptions>.

Appendix

Item I: Reasons for Choosing the *VIA Youth Framework*

We chose to present participants with the *VIA Youth Framework* for several reasons: Firstly, the *VIA Youth Framework* was a readily available, pre-existing framework. Hence, using this framework would save us significant time within the six weeks we had to complete this research.

Secondly, a broad set of evidence has been collected positively associating the VIA character strengths with different indicators of well-being (Proyer *et al.*, 2015). We deemed this an important criterion, given that well-being is an essential aspect of human flourishing, which is the ultimate goal of character education (The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022, 2025).

Thirdly, the *VIA Youth Framework* does not organise its 24 character strengths into different groups. We deemed this absence of grouping important, given the lack of consensus in the literature as to how the character strengths should be grouped. For example, when Peterson and Seligman (2004) initially identified the 24 character strengths, they grouped them into six virtues (Wisdom and Knowledge; Courage; Humanity; Justice; Temperance; and Transcendence). Since then, McGrath and Walker (2016) collected data suggesting that within a youth context, the character strengths are best organised into four groups (intellectual strengths; self-control, interpersonal, and general engagement; and interpersonal strengths focusing on other-directedness). Ray *et al.* (2022) present several of these models, grouping them together in a helpful table. Furthermore, we believed that presenting participants with a framework of character strengths grouped into overarching character domains or virtues could have introduced social desirability bias (Bryman, 2016, p. 217). For example, participants may have been less likely to select teamwork, fairness, and leadership as their least developed character strengths if we told them that these character strengths fell under the virtue of justice.

Fourthly, the *VIA Youth Framework* consisted of what we deemed to be an acceptably broad range of intellectual, moral, civic and performance character strengths as well as practical wisdom, which has been ascribed in the literature to be a 'meta-virtue necessary for good character' (The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022) and the 'key-stone of all virtue' (MacIntyre, 1966, cited in Crossan *et al.*, 2017). To overcome the limitation of the *VIA Youth Framework* being neither completely 'exclusive' nor 'exhaustive' (Peterson and Seligman, 2004), we invited participants to answer using character strengths provided in this framework as well as other character strengths they could think of.

Fifthly, another reason we chose to present participants with the *VIA Youth Framework* is that the 24 VIA Character strengths can be assessed using the *VIA Youth Assessment*, also known as the *VIA Youth-198 Assessment*. The *VIA Youth Assessment* has demonstrated good internal

consistency in most cases across samples from multiple studies (Park and Peterson, 2006; McGrath and Walker, 2016; Ray *et al.*, 2022). Hence, choosing character strengths from the *VIA Youth Framework* would make it much easier for future scholars to evaluate how effectively these programmes cultivate them. Since its release, the VIA Institute has released revised versions of the *VIA Youth-198*, including the shorter *VIA Youth-96*, the *VIA-Youth-1 Assessment* for 8 to 12-year-olds and the *VIA-Youth-2 Assessment* for 13 to 17-year-olds. A couple of studies have shown the *VIA Youth-96* also to have good internal consistency (McGrath and Walker, 2016; Ray *et al.*, 2022); only one study has been published suggesting the reliability of the *VIA-Youth-1 Assessment* (Jermann and McGrath, 2024); no studies have yet been published assessing the reliability of the *VIA-Youth-2 Assessment*.

Sixthly, we chose to present participants with the *VIA Youth Framework* because of the language that it used. The language of the *VIA Youth Framework* is tailored, more accessible and more relevant to primary and secondary school students than other documents. For example, the *VIA Youth Framework* describes Love of Learning as 'Excited to learn new things, Masters new skills' and Social Intelligence as 'Understands Others, Aware of own feelings and thoughts, Shows empathy'. Contrastingly, the *VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues* (VIA, no date c) (henceforth, the *VIA Adult framework*) describes Love of Learning as 'Masters new skills & topics, systematically adds to knowledge' and Social Intelligence as 'Aware of the motives and feelings of others, Knows what makes others tick'. Furthermore, the VIA Adult Framework and other frameworks, such as Crossan *et al.*'s (2017) *Leader Character Framework*, contain other words that are inaccessible or irrelevant to youth. For example, 'Industrious', 'Altruistic', 'Future-minded' (VIA, no date c); 'vigorous', 'results-orientated', 'collegial', 'magnanimous' (Crossan *et al.*, 2017).