Reviewer's report

Title: Physical and mental health issues for adolescents transitioning to university life

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Reviewer: Manuela Schmidt

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for an opportunity to review your manuscript. The manuscript under review positions itself in a mature field of research dealing with university students' health. This in turn means that making either theoretical or empirical or both contributions is difficult, and at this point the manuscript at hand does not convincingly present either. However I do see potential in the manuscript if the authors are willing to undertake major restructuring and further development which I discuss in the comments below:

Major compulsory revisions

1. P1: Title: While yourself addressing the issues of terminology confusion in the field you get caught in the same trap already in the title where you refer to the object of your study as adolescents, while in reality investigating university/college students.

2. P2: Abstract: Your claims of the limited literature in the field is strange and untrue since a large number of studies exist in the field, thus your motivation for making your own research should be theoretically/contextually motivated rather than being based on these inaccurate claims. Your method sections could be extended to make it more informative by including the design of the study and the statistical tests that have been applied. You could also present both aims of your study in the abstract since for now you only mention one of them neglecting access to health services somewhat.

3. P3: 1 paragraph: Certainly interesting and worth mentioning but is it really the best way of starting the paper?

4. P3: paragraph 2, middle: Reference is missing “..are formed at this stage and persist across the life span.”

5. P3: paragraph 2, end: “negative implications” …such as?

6. P3 paragraph 2, last phrase: Yet again, as you have done in the abstract. You claim lack/limited research and use it as a main argument for making your own study. Firstly I do not see lack of research in a specific area justification enough for conducting studies, one need to bring theoretical and in rare cases empirical problematisation as a motivation. Secondly, one should be more open and critical towards the literature that actually has been dealing with the topic of your interest. Considerable attention has been paid to health and wellbeing of university students in public health literature and this cannot be disregarded. One
possibility however to motivate your research is to argue that the context of your investigation might either falsify existing theory or develop it by uncovering new factors. Your manuscript misses your view and definitions on health and well-being, being central concepts in your study.

7. P4: 1 paragraph: middle-end: You should consider mentioning where and when the study took place, maybe even sample size.

8. P4: end: You claim that students suffer from poor health while you then say that 92% of them, in the large study, rate is as good and even better? Thus to avoid confusion you might consider to be more specific in what you actually mean, possibly to add clarity you could add your own view on self-rated health.

9. P4: end: “...with anywhere from 12,5 to 32% of university students...”I would like to see the reporting of previous studies in a different way. That applies to all reports of this type. When reporting percentage, it’s just not good enough to mention the span if the context of that study is missing.

10. P5: 1 paragraph: Geographically you mix all regions, referring first globally, then mentioning a study in USA, then finally arriving in Australia and suddenly jumping back to USA. It would be nice if the reader could follow a red thread, starting globally, then mentioning several studies internationally and afterwards narrowing down the location to Australia.

11. P5, middle section: Its very nice that you actually could find a reference to the statement, because otherwise I would not agree that the number of studies about students’ performance and QoL is limited. However one should be aware that not everything one sees in print is true, you should be able to make your own observation about the state of the literature?

12. P5, middle: reference 31, It would be helpful to state when and where the study was conducted.


14. P6: 1 sentence: Please reconsider this statement or find a reference to support it. There has been done plenty of research on the well-being of university students why not acknowledge it and argue why your research is different?

15. P6: method: sample: When I first read this section I had a few questions that were answered later in the manuscript e.g. if only on campus students were included or also distance students. Since you chose to work with a reward, it could be a good idea to mention it in the section dealing with limitations, providing a discussion on how this could have affected the outcome of your study. Potentially it was a good idea that lead to a good response rate, however one need to be frank in acknowledging disadvantages on one’s date collection.

16. P6: survey instrument: When reading this section I had several questions that I could not find an answer to and I think that this section could be considerably improved. You worked with an established instrument. It would be of interest to know how it was validated. Since you modified it by adding 12 additional questions I wonder if you pre-tested it? The length of the questionnaire could also be mentioned in the section of limitations. I was wondering how long it would
take to fill out the questionnaire. I would have liked to see the questionnaire because I could not get a good enough picture of it by the description given. You mention a scale with 5 response options in the beginning so that one gets an idea that this applied to the entire questionnaire but in one section suddenly you write about 4 answer options and in one of your tables it’s also 4 answer options, so that I find a bit confusing and not clear enough reported. You mention the 11 sections like e.g. about your home and family or about your friends and activities that I don’t find of any relevance for your study and I can’t see that you refer to the results later. Why are they included? I also wondered about ethical approval when reading some of the sections but you state that later, it should be stated earlier under sample. The section eating and exercise I found confusing, why where they mixed? In the new section you suddenly state the answering options which you don’t do for the other sections. The students were asked to rate their health. How did you define health for them? Or did you refer to general health, physical health, mental health separately? You added other new section about safety, why? Nothing about safety is mentioned in the background.

17. P8: 1 sentence: past six months: In my opinion that time span is too long to remember by the students and lowers the validity of your data. The past month I would have found a reasonable time span to remember, the responses on the health conditions would be fewer but also more correct. It could also be mentioned under limitations.

18. P8: Administration: This section should be moved to the sample section with no further title. Administration as a title for a section of a scientific article should be avoided.

19. P9: Physical Health: “Participants rated their health…” please add physical health, you should be consistent with all terms/concepts e.g. well-being, health, you should make a clear distinction between those.

20. P10: top: I was very puzzled to see quotations. You surely mention that you had open end questions but I assumed (though you don’t state it clearly either) that you used a strictly quantitative design. You should state more clearly how you analyzed your open end questions if you mention them in this amount in your findings. Otherwise I would suggest you cut down on your quotations and use them more as a help for your discussion?

21. P10: Mental health: with enjoyment I read about your clear specifications, 8 questions, and a Cronbach value. Please specify how you combined it into a single variable.

22. I think in general that you have interesting findings but the paper is too broad in focus, which in the case of this paper only reduces its contribution. Instead of trying to cover as many things as possible, why not put more focus on for example fatigue, this would make your paper more unique.

23. P14: paragraph 2: your view is very pathogenic. This could also be mentioned in limitations, that a salutogenic view was not of interest. You should also consider stating why. There are surely many students whose well-being/physical health/mental health is improved during university studies.

24. P14: 2nd paragraph: you mention poor health, social and educational
outcomes. Specify or name some examples.

25. P15: 2 paragraph: you mention a holistic approach. That is nice since you have a strictly pathogenic view (you don’t define well-being for your paper). I also would have liked to see more explanations of your results, not if they were confirmed by previous ones that you state so often is so limited but instead I think it would improve your paper by finding answers that explain your results, connect it to other theories, concepts, models. I think that the paper could gain from that.

26. My strongest advice however is to have a stronger focus in the paper. I would drop the 2. part of your aim altogether (health service), maybe even just focus on mental health or fatigue?

I wish you best of luck with your manuscript.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:

'I declare that I have no competing interests