Reviewer's report

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

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Reviewer: Jennifer D. Irwin

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This manuscript represents an interesting study. However, in providing honest responses to each of the components upon which the editor requested be evaluated, there are a number of concerns that need to be addressed prior to the article being ready for publication. Some of the concerns, noted below, may be fairly easy to reconcile while others may require some re-working of the manuscript to best position it as a study that is unique and builds on previous research in this area. The comments below are intended to help the authors argue for the study’s need and most strongly identify the study’s unique contribution to the literature. Using the definition provided in the review guideline, all of the comments below would fit under the heading of “Major Compulsory Revisions”, and are as follows:

1. Although the purpose statement is clear (i.e., to study the physical and mental health status of first year undergraduate students at an Australian university), I’m not sure it is the research that was actually conducted by the study. That is, an on-line tool was used to garner the perspectives of students with regard to things such as how students felt about their home, their studies, etc. The correlation between some of the categories of questions asked and students’ “health status” are not clear. Also, it is imperative that additional clarity be provided to comments such as “basic mental health screening questions round recent feelings of depression or anxiety…. ” References are need to help the reader appreciate the validity of these questions.

2. The rationale for the study is problematic. In particular, in a number of places the authors propose that “research into the health and wellbeing of university students is still largely missing from mainstream public health research.” The population of university students is, perhaps, the most widely studied group of people in terms of general health studies. What is unclear, is how the current study differs from the hundreds of other studies assessing university students’ health status. A very simple ‘google scholar’ search on ‘university students health status’ finds many such studies – what is different about the current one?

3. The second paragraph under “Background” is a rationale that has been published by a number of other people (i.e., university students are a large group worthy of study, future decision makers, health habits that form now are more likely to persist across life-span)…not sure that paragraph is sufficiently referenced (while a number of the individual points are referenced, others are not, and those who are the original creators of this rationale are not referenced).
4. What was the method of analysis used for the qualitative comments?

5. Why was a survey of adolescents used as the survey to be adapted for this group of university students (whose ages could be known by asking university administrators, or other university-related research, for the average age of first year students)? Why were previously validated surveys assessing the health-related status of university students not used/adapted for the current study? For instance, what was the rationale for not adapting the tool used in the 2002 article by Vaez and Laflamme (First year university students’ health status and socio-demographic determinants of their self-rated health)? Or, the “Student Health Status Survey” used by a number of authors?

6. In terms of writing, there appears to be more than one “voice” writing the paper (writing styles vary from section to section, including differences in grammar styles). The writing itself is fine, it just differs and need to be more consistent (including little things like using Australian spelling throughout, rather than some American and some Australian, reducing the overuse of the word “whilst” throughout some sections of the document, etc).

7. There is a curious argument within the manuscript about ages of university students…in the Background section it is argued that ages cannot be nailed down for university students, and then later that the findings cannot really be in the context of other studies due to the age-defining challenges, and yet there are so many previous studies done on university students (and on first year university students) and yet the authors still do not pull from that vast array of literature to contextualize the findings throughout the discussion section.

8. The title of the paper suggests the study focuses on adolescents transitioning to university life, but in fact, the study indicates the students studied were a mean age of 20+ years and they were studied while they already attending university. The title needs to be changed to more accurately reflect the study that was done.

9. While the current study itself is meritorious, a reworking of the rationale for it, a proposal of its unique contribution in light of all the previous work done, and contextualizing it within the vast university student-related health research is needed to determine its feasibility for publication.

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

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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’