Reviewer's report

Title: The influence of academic examinations on energy and nutrient intake in male university students

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Reviewer: Frances Hillier-Brown

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This article describes a very useful study that explores whether examinations (and the stress associated) affect the diets of a male student population. However, there are currently some major (but not difficult) gaps that need to be addressed before it can be accepted for publication.

- Major Compulsory Revisions

1. The study is described correctly as an exploratory study in the introduction sections but this also needs to be emphasised when discussing the results. The authors appear to have a lot of confidence in the results; however, with such a small sample size, with one cluster having only n=2, the results can only be exploratory.

2. A clear reason why only male students were recruited is needed – plus the implications of this. As described in the introduction the effect of stress on food intake may be stronger in women, and therefore the results of this study could have been very different if female students were also recruited. It seems odd that there is no explanation as to why they were not included.

3. The main research question should be more clearly defined at the end of the introduction. As it stands, it reads as if the main aim of the study is to test the use of the photographic method of diet assessment, rather than to determine how students’ diet may be altered. My understanding, after reading this article, is that the main aim of this study is to explore any changes in the students’ diet (and the method that was used to measure diet was an automated photography plus 24-hr recall – with good reason!). The testing of the automated photography method plus 24-hr recall, as this is a relatively novel method, is then a secondary aim. However, there are no results or discussion relating this this – so this either needs to be added – or this secondary aim not stated.

4. More and clearer discussion is needed on the strengths and particularly the limitations of the study i.e. no psychometric measures of eating behaviour. A specific section in the discussion would be useful.

5. Throughout the article there needs to be clarification that the photographic method used was automated. This is a novel method (and in my opinion a very exciting one) being used to aid diet assessment. However, there are important differences between photographic methods that are automated and those that
rely on participants taking their own photographs. This clarification will also help those interested in diet assessment methods to identify the method correctly and easily.

- Minor Essential Revisions

6. Methods section: Clarify where the study was set (also in the abstract), which university the students were recruited from and which university ethics committee

- Discretionary Revisions

7. Results section: It would be useful to add in discussion about Cluster S when interpreting the results in Tables 2 and 3.

8. Discussion: It would be useful to include some discussion on what is needed in future research of this type e.g. work with female students, exploring differences between restrained vs. unrestrained eaters, exploring changes in emotional eaters, etc.

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests