Reviewer's report

Title: Evaluation and treatment of low and anxious mood in Chinese speaking international students studying in Scotland: Study protocol of a pilot randomised controlled trial.

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Reviewer: Jinhui Ma

Reviewer's report:

In the paper titled “Evaluation and treatment of low and anxious mood in Chinese speaking international students studying in Scotland: study protocol of a pilot randomized controlled trial”, the authors presented the design of a pilot study which aims to examine the feasibility of conducting a large randomized controlled trial to assess the effectiveness of an online CBT-based course on low mood and anxiety among Chinese international students.

The presentation of this manuscript is not very clear and needs to be improved substantially. My major concerns include:

1. The manuscript does not meet the acceptable English standards and should be proofread thoroughly. It was too hard to read, understand and review.

2. Many information in the abstract are not clear. The authors mentioned that levels of depression, anxiety, social functioning and satisfaction will be assessed in the methods section. However when these information will be assessed - baseline, 3 months after randomization, or at both time points? In the background section, the authors mentioned low mood. What is the definition of “low mood”? What is the relationship between low mood and the level of depression, social functioning and satisfaction? In the discussion section, the author mentioned “test the trial design”. What does this mean? How would you “test” the trial design? The word “test” was abused in this manuscript and sometimes should be changed to “assess”, “investigate” or “study” etc.

3. In the introduction section the author should provide a clear rationale about why this pilot study is important and necessary. For example, if the lost to follow-up rate can be estimated from published literature, conducting a pilot study just for obtaining some knowledge about the lost to follow-up rate will be completely unnecessary and waste of money.

4. One of your research questions is “how many participants will be needed for a sufficiently powered future RCT” (page 7). This research question is too general and should be very specific. For example you should explain what information are needed but not available in the current literature for calculating the sample size of the future RCT.

5. In the Participants section (page 7), you mentioned one of the aim is to identify any problems with recruitment and delivery of the intervention and completion of evaluation measures. What kind of problems with recruitment and delivery of the
intervention and completion of evaluation measures do you expect to have? Researcher should have an idea about the problems they will have when conducting a large CRT, propose strategies to solve these problems, and assess the performance of these strategies in a pilot study. And a pilot study should be designed very carefully to provide as much useful information as possible for the design of the future RCT.

6. On the top of page 8, eligible participants of the pilot study must be students living in the UK for the next two months is. Why do you choose “next two months” as the inclusion criteria given the primary end points will be measured at 3 months after randomization?

7. The participant of this pilot study are all from the University of Glasgow. They are all Chinese international students and are very likely to know each other or have some connections with each other. How do you handle the "contamination" between the intervention and control? Will the future RCT have the same target population, i.e. the students from the University of Glasgow? Or you are going to include the international students from other university? Have you considered a cluster randomized design?

8. The randomization will take place using the randomization algorithm contained within SPSS or Excel as mentioned in the randomization section on page 9. You can’t make final decision on which software to use?

9. Four questionnaires - patient health questionnaire-9, generalized anxiety disorder 7, and work and social adjustment scale, and the client satisfaction questionnaire – are adopted in this pilot study. Why do you use these questionnaires? What is the rationale? Are they proved to be valid measurement tools for this population?

10. In the statistical analysis section (on page 14), you wrote: Evaluable data and intention to treat analysis will occur”. I wonder what “evaluable data” are? I am curious about how the “intention to treat analysis” will be applied in this pilot study? How the PHQ9 data are used for power calculation for the future RCT?

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

Quality of written English: Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

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.