

AGRICULTURAL EDUCATORS AWARD REPORT

Mental health education in agricultural universities and colleges: learning lessons from Cornell University



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Name of University/College: Harper Adams
University

www.tfcct.co.uk

Photograph: David with the Cornell Dairy Science Club



The Farmers Club

Charitable Trust

AGRICULTURAL EDUCATOR AWARD REPORT



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TITLE	Mental health education in agricultural universities and colleges: learning lessons from Cornell University
Scholar	David Christian Rose
Objectives	To learn lessons from Cornell University (and the NFYFC) about how to design and deliver mental health education suitable for agricultural students at university (and college) – with a view to implementation at Harper Adams and beyond.
Countries Visited	USA (New York State)
Key Messages	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Mental health education at agricultural universities and colleges needs a variety of delivery formats: compulsory and non-compulsory, face-to-face and online, accessed as a group and individually in a private space. This is because all students learn differently and some may not always feel comfortable discussing mental health in front of their peers.2. Integration into the curriculum requires support for current staff who may be non-specialists, and collaboration with experts.3. Welcoming wellbeing support spaces and informal stress-busting social events can improve awareness of the need for mental health support and normalise conversations around it.4. Collaboration with student societies and other student champions is key to raise awareness and make students feel that they can relate to the issue.5. Where appropriate, lived mental health experiences of agricultural professionals could be integrated into course delivery.

The Farmers Club Charitable Trust

The Farmers Club Charitable Trust was founded in 1981 and is dedicated to supporting the agricultural community in the UK through education, leadership and innovation. Our mission is to enhance the agricultural sector by providing financial assistance to advance education and training within the food farming, and associated industries.

The Agricultural Educator Awards are part of a suite of initiatives; these are open for applications every Autumn and awards are made every March.

Full details can be seen on the Trust's website www.tfcct.co.uk.

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(The views in this report are those of the author only)

With special thanks to Kendra Janssen, Prof Lori Leonard, and all those who gave up their time at Cornell University and Rural Minds.

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The topic: Mental health education in agricultural universities and colleges

According to the Farm Safety Foundation, 95% of farmers under 40 believe that “mental health is the biggest hidden problem facing farmers today”¹. A review² of literature on young farmer mental health identified at least ten different stressors that they face, including poor access to wellbeing services and limited knowledge around mental health, stigma around it, alcohol and smoking issues, concerns over climate change, financial concerns, firearms, isolation and loneliness, sexism and misogyny from the perspective of female farmers, and time pressures. Wider literature³ on the subject shows that farmers suffer business-related, weather-related, social-related, and policy-related pressures.

The Agricultural Educator Award project ran parallel with two related pieces of work looking into how mental health education in UK agricultural universities and colleges could be improved. Though the focus initially was on how learnings could be integrated into the curriculum at Harper Adams University, efforts have been made to go beyond this to other Landex institutions in the UK and other institutions internationally.

The precursor for the Educator Award project was a piece of work, currently in review⁴ in the academic literature, by Tom York at Harper Adams University. He surveyed over 200 students, lecturers, and wellbeing staff across (mainly) Landex institutions to understand the pressures faced by young people and how mental health education could be improved. He found that students face pressures related to being young people, young people in education, and young people in education pursuing agricultural careers (and, in some cases, having a farming background). Across the institutions who responded to the survey, he found that mental health support for student was offered through dedicated wellbeing teams and occasional specialist events or external talks, but that it was seldom integrated into compulsory curricula (certainly not in a sustained way).

A cross-country comparison⁵ in Ireland, New Zealand, the UK, and the USA, of five agricultural universities similarly found differences in how mental health education was delivered. Whilst some had more dedicated modules or online courses, others relied on external talks and wellbeing support teams, with less dedicated space in the curriculum.

¹ <https://www.yellowwellies.org/mind-your-head/>

² <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1059924X.2026.2615778>

³ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1059924X.2022.2137616>

⁴ York, T., Lewis, M., Gould, M., Rose, D. C. (in review). The role of agricultural education in supporting student mental health: helping agricultural students (and educators) to cope with intersectional pressures.

⁵ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1389224X.2026.2696558>

Both pieces of work, and this Educator Award report, attempt to start work towards answering the following question: **How can mental health education be best delivered in agricultural universities and colleges?**

The unique contribution of the Educator Award was to fund a two-week visit to Cornell University, who were part of the international collaboration mentioned above. I already had funding in place to visit Lincoln University, New Zealand, to learn from their experience of implementing a new course on mental health for their agricultural students. On a similar timescale, Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine had worked with NY FarmNet and Rural Minds to develop a free online course⁶ on mental health and suicide in rural communities. At the time of the Educator Award, this course had already been delivered, and NY FarmNet was working with both veterinary and agricultural student cohorts at Cornell to raise awareness of the course and to deliver other mental health education-related events.

The purpose of the Educator Award visit to Cornell was to learn from initial experiences of the course, including:

1. Hearing from students about their experience of the course and what is needed to improve mental health support for agricultural (+similar courses) students.
2. Hearing from those designing and implementing the course to gather their thoughts on its impact and aspects that other educators needed to be aware of.

Visit to Cornell University

Below are reports from individual meetings at Cornell University, with lessons learned brought together in a following section. The record of meetings is chronological, except for the cluster of student-facing seminars reported at the end.

NY FarmNet meetings – Greg Mruk (Executive Director), Kendra Janssen (Education and Research Specialist), and Audrey McDougal (Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Family Consultant for NY FarmNet)

In these meetings, we spoke about the origins of the online course, which was developed by the College of Veterinary Medicine and NY FarmNet in partnership with Rural Minds. There was a perceived urgent need for improved, free mental health education and support for veterinary students, veterinarians, and agribusiness professionals working towards, and in a stressful profession. From the perspective of NY FarmNet, there was also a desire to reach agricultural students with support for mental health.

⁶ <https://www.vet.cornell.edu/about-us/well-being/events/online-course>

From our conversations, it was clear that the online course was only one tool within a wider toolbox. The course was considered to be important, but it was acknowledged that one format of learning about any issue was never sufficient. Face-to-face education has its place alongside online learning, but there may be a risk that online courses can be done without ‘taking enough in’. The course was not compulsory, and it was felt that students needed to be supported year-round with stress-busting events and be continually reminded and equipped with enhanced awareness around mental health. As such, a number of different activities were undertaken to normalise conversations around mental health:

1. End of semester BBQ for agricultural students: with games, animals, and NY FarmNet family consultants there to speak to students: this was perceived to be a fun activity for students without overly using language around mental health, offering them the opportunity to de-stress and speak to family consultants if they wanted without pressure. It was felt that ‘informal’ events were the ‘way in’ to encourage students to open up about mental health.
2. Integration in the curriculum: a lecturer in an agricultural management class had begun to initiate conversations around mental health education to normalise the issue.
3. Connecting with student societies (particularly those agriculture-related): regular visits or events with clubs like the Cornell Dairy Science Club to normalise conversation around mental health and improve knowledge.
4. Promoting lived experiences: inviting people from the farming community to share personal stories of struggle and mental health challenge and solutions.

Questions were raised about the role of the university in supporting alumni and how alumni themselves could be part of supporting current students.

The clear message was that a single course alone was not enough to equip students with the motivation to learn about mental health, nor to improve awareness, and nor to improve knowledge. Instead, a wider package of events needed to work together. It was felt that there were issues unique to agricultural and veterinary students (and similar) around mental health that required specialist help from NY FarmNet staff.



Meeting (one of many) with Kendra Janssen from NY FarmNet at Taughannock Falls, NY (my daughter blurred out!). Photograph of meetings with Greg Mruk and Audrey McDougal not taken.

Prof Kathryn Boor – former Dean of the Graduate School and Vice Provost for Graduate Education and former Ronald P. Lynch Dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS).

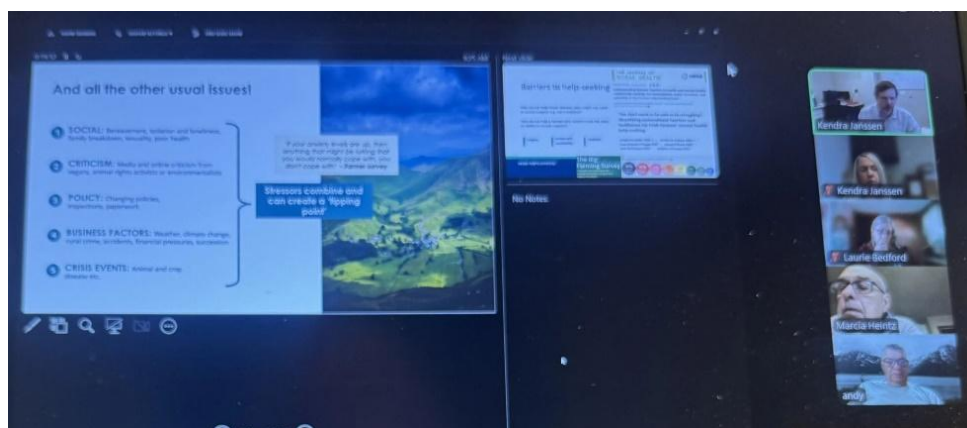
Prof Boor, an honorary recipient of a doctorate at Harper Adams University, had previously served for many years at Cornell in roles where she saw first-hand the pressures faced by students on agricultural-related courses. This meeting was an opportunity to reinforce a sense that agricultural students in the USA face very similar pressures to those faced by students at Harper Adams University, across the UK, and internationally. These included the generational pressures on young farmers to make it in a turbulent industry where some sectors are in decline and many pressures accumulate to stress mental health. We particularly discussed stresses related to succession and the implementation of new ideas in an industry where older farm managers tend to still dominate.



Meeting with Prof Kathryn Boor

Meeting with NY FarmNet consultants – presentation and discussion – online as consultants spread throughout NY State.

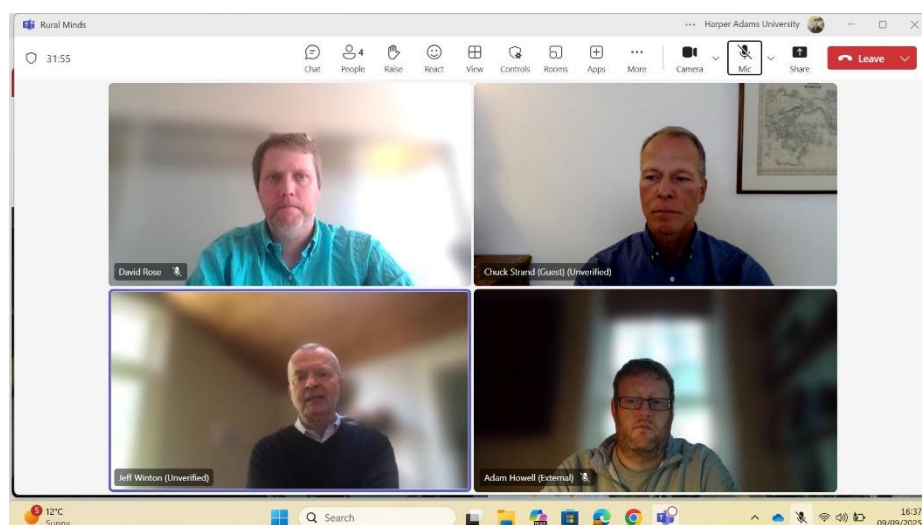
During my time at Cornell, I had the opportunity to present a seminar to NY FarmNet staff to further discuss some of the driving factors for poor mental health in the farming population. This reinforced the similarities between the situation in the UK and USA. Succession was discussed as a key stressor.



Seminar with NY FarmNet Family and Financial Consultants

Meeting with Rural Minds (Jeff Winton, Chuck Strand) and Adam Howell (NY FarmNet) – online as Chuck/Jeff based elsewhere in the USA.

The College of Veterinary medicine and NY FarmNet partnered with Rural Minds on the creation of the online course that was designed to give learners practical support strategies and resources to navigate mental health challenges in rural communities. From the start of their discussions, the value of lived experience was deemed necessary to ensure that course content would be built from personable stories that learners could relate to i.e. others in the agricultural industry who have faced challenges and could underscore the importance of mental health education,



Meeting with Rural Minds and NY FarmNet

Meeting with Dr Becca Jablonski (Associate Professor, SC Johnson School of Business)

I had a short informal meeting with Dr Jablonski who encouraged awareness-raising around mental health amongst undergraduates in agribusiness management classes. We explored potential collaboration around using data to investigate the value of mental health support for farmers.



Meeting with Dr Becca Jablonski

Meeting with Veterinary students (Kerstyn Countrymann and Mia Durham)

I had the opportunity to meet two veterinary students to hear about their experience of taking the online course. The students also provided a tour of the impressive Veterinary School!

The students said that the course was online and not compulsory, which had advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, there was recognition that students were very busy and the online course enabled them to do it at their own pace, in their own time. The students had found the course valuable in increasing awareness and knowledge on the topic, but these were students who were possibly more motivated than some to seek out such information (due to life experiences). On the flip side, it was acknowledged that students would need motivation to do it and that not everyone would do it if it was not a compulsory part of the curriculum.

This prompted a discussion on the extent to which there should be compulsory mental health education integrated into the curriculum. Whilst there was one class related to mental health education and the importance of good communication around it, it was felt that there could be more content across the curriculum. The importance of personal stories and lived experience was again highlighted so that students could relate to content. In addition, the value of raising awareness of the issue of mental health, as well as the presence of course materials, was also promoted through more

informal social events. The role of mentoring from older students and alumni was also raised as a way of enhancing mental health support for students.



Meeting with Veterinary students who had taken the online mental health course.

Agriculture/Alpha Zeta/Dairy Science Club student perspectives – Charlie Moser, Avery Kim, CUDS, AZ, Becker

Throughout my two-week stay at Cornell, there was an opportunity to speak with many students studying agriculture, animal science, veterinary, or related (and general) courses. This included individual meetings with two agricultural students (Avery Kim, Charlie Moser), with students from the Dairy Science Club and Alpha Zeta (agriculture-focus), and students at Becker House (several courses).



Dinner with Alpha Zeta⁷ (devoted to advancement of Agriculture and Life Sciences)

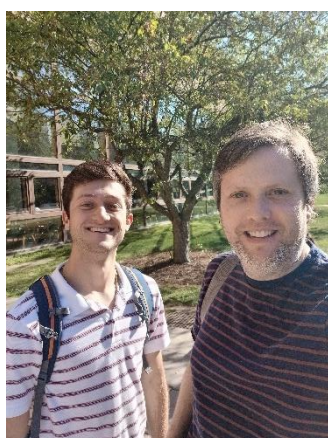
⁷ <https://www.alphazeta-cornell.org/>



Meeting with Avery Kim (Agricultural student and NY FarmNet intern)



Meetings with the Cornell Dairy Science Club (left) and Becker House students (right)



Meeting with Charlie Moser (Agricultural Student, worked with NY FarmNet)

Each of these meetings added something valuable. The meeting with students across several courses at Becker House reinforced the message that stigma might mean that students are not always comfortable talking about mental health in front of their peers. An online course taken individually

could address this, but other efforts to normalise conversations around mental health would still be needed and a role for face-to-face support was also still noted.

At meetings with Cornell Dairy Science and Alpha Zeta students, there was a general sense that content on mental health across all agriculture-related courses would be a positive step forward. However, there was a discussion over the pros and cons of making it compulsory, such that it could become a tick-box exercise whilst ensuring good attendance, and non-compulsory where learning could be stronger, but it may not reach those who need it. The clear message was that informal social events were needed to raise awareness of mental health amongst students. Overt language around mental health was not always felt necessary. Student champions were considered important so that other students could relate and feel more comfortable in talking about mental health. It was also felt that the curriculum could make better use of farm visits and alumni, so that, where appropriate, demonstration exercises on-farm could incorporate discussions around mental health challenges. Learning from lived experience was considered very important, asking real farmers and other people in agricultural communities to share their stories.

The individual student meetings reinforced the importance of meeting farmers where they are and ensuring that credible mental health science was incorporated into the course, making the most of specialists like psychiatrists and psychologists. This would involve cross-disciplinary working as agricultural lecturers would be unlikely to have these specialist skills.

Kate Buckley – Well-being Program Director, Cornell College of Veterinary Medicine

Kate had been a key player in the design and delivery of the course, and helps provide well-being education and supports to students, faculty, and staff at the College of Veterinary Medicine. We discussed whether the online course had increased ‘demand’ for wellbeing support. It was hard to tell whether this was the case or not, but the conversation focused on the practicalities of developing the course and providing relevant well-being support. As mentioned earlier, to make the course highly relevant and attractive to those who (will and do) live and work in rural America, there was a deep drive to include those with lived experience. In addition, careful consideration was given to ensure that the support and resources included were tailored to the intended audience. Beyond the course (which is offered to all incoming veterinary students as part of their pre-orientation pre-requisites), Kate works hard to make sure that students, faculty, and staff have a solid sense of the supports available to them, as well as who they can turn to during challenging times. We spoke about the importance of the very location and design of her office, which is in an area that students walk past regularly. It is deliberately designed to be welcoming, with opportunities for both passive and active engagement. Kate also strives to reiterate that she is a member of a friendly, approachable, and trustworthy team. In short, we discussed the importance of breaking down barriers to students accessing well-being supports and ensuring proper resourcing at all levels, across the college. (meeting not pictured).

A slightly unrelated meeting, but there was a brief opportunity to meet the team at Cornell AgriTech, where we partially discussed the impact of technology on farmer mental health.



Seminars

CARL BECKER HOUSE CAFÉ

WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 10 2025, 7:15pm
Becker House, Seminar Room (G32)
Open to the Cornell community.
For more info email mlc368@cornell.edu

With A Little Help From My Friends?
Young farmer mental health and the potential role
of peer-led education



Young farmers and potential new entrants to farming can suffer from poor mental wellbeing at home, at work, and at university. Farming-related pressures are combined with the challenges of being a young person, including in potentially stressful environments like universities. This talk considers the role (if any) of peer-led mental health education initiatives aimed at young farmers at university, exploring pros and cons, and alternative ways of providing support.

Special guest speaker
David Rose
Elizabeth Creak Chair in Sustainable Agricultural Change
at Harper Adams University



1-800-347-3276 | www.nyfarmnet.org

About David Rose: David Christian Rose is the Elizabeth Creak Chair in Sustainable Agricultural Change at Harper Adams University. His latest research has focused on farmer behavior, adaptation, and support.

Wider learning – NFYFC

As well as the wider projects on mental health education mentioned at the start of the report, the Farmers Club also suggested contacting the National Federation of Young Farmers Clubs to hear about their experience of running the Rural+ training programme on mental health. Sarah Palmer (Agriculture and Rural Issues Manager) sent several resources on this programme. This interactive course aimed at 10-28 year old YFC members and 16-25 year old agricultural students was first launched in 2013 with contributions over the years from FCN and the DPJ Foundation. The training⁸ covers:

- “understanding stress and anxiety;
- managing personal mental wellbeing;
- how to talk about mental health;
- seeking support and supporting others.”

It was clear from the NFYFC’s membership survey that young farmers’ clubs are a key place where wellbeing support is given (94% reported benefits for mental wellbeing and community connection⁹) [also raised in wider literature]. From online testimonials, young people who had accessed the Rural+ programme praised its interactivity which was thought to have built trust and broken down the stigma in speaking about mental health and built awareness of the issue in the younger farming population.

Key messages and impact

The key message from the visit was that any content on mental health at agricultural universities needs to sit within a whole package that works together to enhance awareness and knowledge on the subject. Originally, I had envisaged that Harper Adams University could adapt an online course, but it is clear that wider considerations need to be made. The following key messages are being shared with colleagues:

1. Mental health education at agricultural universities and colleges needs a variety of delivery formats: compulsory and non-compulsory, face-to-face and online, accessed as a group and individually in a private space. This is because all students learn differently and some may not always feel comfortable discussing mental health in front of their peers.
2. Integration into the curriculum requires support for current staff who may be non-specialists, and collaboration with experts.
3. Welcoming wellbeing support spaces and informal stress-busting social events can improve awareness of the need for mental health support and normalise conversations around it.
4. Collaboration with student societies and other student champions is key to raise awareness and make students feel that they can relate to the issue.

⁸ <https://nfyfc.org.uk/rural-plus-wellbeing>

⁹ <https://nfyfc.org.uk/membership-experience-survey>

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5. Where appropriate, lived mental health experiences of agricultural professionals could be integrated into course delivery.

It is too early to state what the impact has been from the visit. Whilst conversations have started about how to incorporate learnings into the curriculum and wider wellbeing provision at Harper Adams University, it will take some time for changes to become embedded. It is intended for learnings to be incorporated into the Work and Wellbeing module for Agribusiness students and in a module (taught 2027 onwards) by myself on Change in Agriculture. A meeting is being scheduled with course co-ordinators to discuss learnings. I also presented some of this work at Landex's annual conference in 2026 and there was appetite from several education providers on the need to collaborate to learn lessons from what each institution is doing to support student mental health. This work is to be taken forward, hopefully in a cross-institution working group.

Appendix 1 - Statement of expenditure

Expenses	Total
Accommodation	£1,309.67
Miscellaneous (phone charges, laundry)	£32.70
Subsistence	£312.46
Travel	£1,242.47
Total	£2,897.30