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The role rural mothers play in supporting agricultural students during their first year at university

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ABSTRACT

First year university is a time of transition and identity development for young people. Faced with new challenges, they navigate study, social relationships and financial independence. Young people from rural communities are especially vulnerable, with increased mental health and suicide risk. This article presents qualitative findings from exploratory research focused on understanding the mental health and self-care knowledge and behaviours of first-year students in agriculture programmes at two universities in New Zealand. The research involved semi-structured interviews with 15 first-year students. Findings showed that mothers delivered key messages about self-care and mental well-being that supported young people from rural communities during their first year of university study. This research acknowledges the role rural mothers play as key supports and mental health educators for young people. It highlights the importance of ensuring that educators and researchers consider the role rural mothers play as protective factors for young people as they transition to early adulthood.

KEYWORDS

Mental health; self-care; rural wellbeing; tertiary education; student experience; parenting; university transition

Introduction

Tertiary education, including university, occurs at a challenging time when young people are entering adulthood and dealing with the pressures of academic study (Winder, Stanley-Clarke, Maris, Hay, & Knook, 2025). The first year of university is, therefore, a critical time of transition in a young person's life (Dotterer, 2022; Doyle & O'Donnell, 2022; Parker, Yacoub, Mughal, & Mamari, 2023; Sax & Weintraub, 2014). The skills and coping mechanisms young people develop while at university can determine their life-long coping patterns (Stanley-Clarke et al., 2024). Additionally, experiences during this time may affect their retention and success in higher education (Doyle & O'Donnell, 2022). Several students may be leaving home for the first time, developing new relationships, and seeing themselves as independent from their family unit (Dotterer, 2022; Doyle & O'Donnell, 2022; Parker, Yacoub, Mughal, & Mughal 2023).

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The majority of students enrolled in agricultural programmes in countries with a strong agricultural industry, such as the United States and New Zealand, come from rural backgrounds (Boerngen & Rickard, 2020; Foreman, Retallick, & Smalley, 2018; Rayfield, Murphrey, Skaggs, & Shafer, 2013; Winder et al., 2025). Alongside the pressures of moving away from home to begin university degrees, agricultural students may face unique challenges due to travelling long distances to attend university, limited transport options to access their homes, some in remote locations, as well as financial constraints due to cash-flow issues with money tied up in farm assets (Lewis, Dickson-Swift, Talbot, & Snow, 2007).

Internationally, the social and economic costs of suicide and mental ill health within rural communities have been well documented (Beautrais, 2018; Kennedy, Maple, McKay, & Brumby, 2014; Malmberg, Simkin, & Hawton, 1999; Milner, Spittal, Pirkis, & LaMontagne, 2013). Young people are an at-risk subgroup in rural communities (Rose et al., 2024; Winder et al., 2025). A recent systematic literature review conducted on the mental-health and wellbeing of young people living and working on farms highlights concerns for this at-risk group, such as the geographic and cultural isolation of their work environment, and community attitudes towards seeking help when facing challenges (Hay, Knook, Stanley-Clarke, & Winder, 2026). There is little research, however, detailing the wellbeing of young rural people aged 18–24 in their first year of university as they transition away from their rural communities and into careers within agriculture.

Family dysfunction, including situations where there is conflict, misbehaviour, and instability resulting in a lack of emotional attachment, or situations of abuse, is often cited as a stressor for young people (O'Shea Brown, 2021). Much attention focuses on family relationship breakdowns and the negative consequences for young people's mental health and wellbeing (Stewart, Semovski, & Lapshina, 2024). There is research investigating how tertiary education providers can involve and communicate with parents as young people transition into that environment (Fingerman et al., 2016; Sax & Weintraub, 2014), yet scant research detailing the positive role mothers can play in educating and supporting young people during their first year of university, including those from rural communities or studying agriculture.

This article reports qualitative research findings to gain a greater understanding of the mental-health and self-care knowledge and behaviours of first year students in agriculture programmes at two universities in New Zealand. These universities are the primary land-based universities delivering agriculture programmes in New Zealand. The research conducted 15 interviews to understand young people's experience of a mental-health programme they recently completed alongside factors related to their mental wellbeing. This article details findings about agricultural students' perception of the role their mothers played in educating and supporting their mental wellbeing during the first year at university.

Literature review and theory

Despite literature detailing the positive benefits of a young person's relationship with their parents, there is declining wellbeing among young people (Parker et al., 2023; Sax & Weintraub, 2014). Internationally, young people aged 15–24 have increasing

levels of mental distress that affect their daily functioning (Stanley-Clarke et al., 2024). An independent monitoring body, the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, in the research location, New Zealand, notes deterioration in youth wellbeing and its determinants between 2018 and 2021 (Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, 2024). New Zealand research on suicide deaths on farms between 2007 and 2015 found that 25% were young people under 25 years old (Beautrais, 2018). In addition, a study commissioned by Farmstrong, a New Zealand rural wellbeing initiative, found that 64% of farming men and 77% of farming women aged 35 and under had at least one wellbeing issue that negatively affects their daily lives (Farmstrong, 2019). The experience in New Zealand mirrors international trends related to young farmers' wellbeing in the United Kingdom (Wheeler & Lobley, 2022), the United States (Rudolphi, Berg, & Parsaik, 2020), and Ireland (Rose et al., 2024). Alongside the vulnerabilities of coming from, and returning to rural communities, moving away from home for higher education may also affect young people's mental health and wellbeing (Stanley-Clarke et al., 2024). Previous research shows between 85–90% of agricultural students have a rural background (Winder et al., 2025). This puts young rural agricultural students' mental health statistically at risk.

Adolescence is a period of growth and development in the social ecologies and interpersonal relationships of young people (Williford et al., 2023). Characterised as a time of emerging adulthood, the later teenage years through to the mid-20s is a period of extended post-adolescence (Dotterer, 2022; Doyle & O'Donnell, 2022; Meltzer, Muir, & Craig, 2018; Sax & Weintraub, 2014). This is a time when young people are self-focused, learning who they are and their place in the world (Sax & Weintraub, 2014), and making decisions about their social and economic futures, including education, career, relationships, and world views (Meltzer et al., 2018). It's also when they may move away from home to attend university. The transition to university often involves developing new relationships outside of family for support and advice in decision-making (Meltzer, Muir, & Craig, 2016; Meltzer et al., 2018).

Much research focuses on the role of a trusted adult in young people's lives, including youth mentors (Meltzer et al., 2016; Meltzer et al., 2018; Pringle, Whitehead, Milne, Scott, & McAteer, 2018; Williford et al., 2023). Trusted adults are those who are a reliable, consistent presence, whom young people find available, to whom they can turn for help, and who will take them seriously (Meltzer et al., 2016; Meltzer et al., 2018; Pringle et al., 2018). This literature mainly focuses on the role of adults who are outside the family home. Johnston, Sanders, Munford, Alessi, and Ballantyne (2018) describe these individuals as "magic people". In researching factors supporting positive transitions for young people out of state care, Johnston et al. (2018) note that magic people have transformative potential, exhibiting many of parents' positive characteristics (e.g. respecting and honouring the young person) and a willingness to offer second chances, activating a sense of self-belief in the young person, and stepping outside their roles to offer support (Johnston et al., 2018; Meltzer et al., 2018). Meltzer et al. (2018) note a young person is more likely to be ambitious in their educational goals, engaged in paid employment, and progressing their careers if they have the support or advice of a trusted adult. Having a trusted adult also supports young people in having better mental and physical health and engaging in fewer risky activities (Meltzer et al., 2016; Melzter et al., 2018; Pringle et al., 2019).

Williford et al. (2023) explain that during the transition to university and adulthood, the relationships young people have with significant adults can be a protective factor for various public health concerns, including high-risk sexual behaviour, drug taking, and mental-health concerns, including suicidality. Having a secure attachment to parents makes young people feel safe, secure, and valued in their relationship, contributing to wellbeing across a person's life, which also correlates with higher psychological wellbeing, and leads to positive social and emotional adjustment (Sax & Weintraub, 2014). In the phase of emerging adulthood, parents remain an important source of tangible and non-tangible support (Dotterer, 2022). Supporting autonomy, however, requires that the relationship between university students and their parents be carefully balanced between separation and connectedness (Dotterer, 2022). As young people seek independence and autonomy from their parents, it can also be a time when they are uncertain about how much communication or interaction to have with parents (Meltzer et al., 2018; Sax & Weintraub, 2014), particularly when relying on parents' support to adjust to university life (Dotterer, 2022; Doyle & O'Donnell, 2022). While positive family relationships have a strong connection to academic success and the emotional wellbeing of university students, the relationship between young people and their parents changes (Parker et al., 2023).

Prior research exists about the harm suffered by young people when there is a breakdown of the family unit and significant strain on the parent–child relationship. In situations where this relationship is strong, however, it can support young people's development of resilience and wellbeing (Fingerman et al., 2012; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Joronen & Åstedt-Kurki, 2005; Noble & McGrath, 2012; WHO, 2016). It can also support the building of social capital. This research did not set out to test theory; instead it reports on a surprising finding that emerged during data analysis. Theories, including social capital, support understanding the nature of familial relationships and how they affect wellbeing and resilience. Social capital, in this context, relates to the building of relationships that provide access to resources, including social mobility (Coleman, 1988). The building of social capital through positive social relationships helps university students cope with the pressures of higher education and is linked with improved mental-health and life satisfaction (Bye, Muller, & Oprescu, 2020; Rienties, Johan, & Jindal-Snape, 2015).

A positive relationship with strong communication between parents and a young adult is characterised by warmth, interest, and emotional support, where the parent is encouraging of the young person's choices and desire for independence (Noble & McGrath, 2012). A non-intrusive and uncritical relationship is recommended, as most young people have a desire to maintain family connections while establishing a sense of autonomy (Joronen & Åstedt-Kurki, 2005; Sax & Weintraub, 2014). The literature lacks consensus in relation to an approach to parental involvement in education, including higher education (Dotterer, 2022). The type of parental support and involvement during university study varies by students' development phase, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Dotterer, 2022). It also depends on what the parents value as important and the parenting strategies they see as most effective. While there is concern that too much parental support in young adulthood can prolong dependence, it works well when family members provide consistent emotional support which young people often do not have in other relationships (Parker et al., 2023; Swartz, Kim, Uno, Mortimer, &

O'Brien, 2011). When young people receive the support they desire, it is associated with having clear life goals, higher life satisfaction, and better wellbeing (Fingerman et al., 2012). While it is known that parents positively and negatively influence young people, and that trusted adults can be an important support during the transition to adulthood, there is scant literature about the specific role mothers play in educating and supporting young people's mental health during their first year of university, including long-term benefits. There is also no discernible literature on the role mothers play supporting agricultural students and/or first year university students from rural communities. This article aims to address these gaps by detailing the role of mothers, as educators and supporters, for first-year students studying agriculture in New Zealand.

Methods

Qualitative interviews are an established method used to capture the depth of data and the complexities of participants' worldviews and experiences, including generating data related to young people's wellbeing (Bourke, 2003; Hay, Stanley-Clarke, Maris, Winder, & Knook, 2024; Holton, Riley, & Kallis, 2023; Patton, 2015; Stanley-Clarke et al., 2024). Holton et al. (2023) incorporate qualitative interviews to enable rural young people to share their perspectives about geographical isolation experienced on farms and how this intersects with the other everyday farming pressures they face. The current research uses qualitative interviews to generate in-depth data about participants' experiences of learning about mental health and wellbeing, including where they learned this information and their self-care knowledge and behaviours. The research aim is to gain a greater understanding of the mental health and self-care knowledge and behaviours of young first-year students studying agriculture at two New Zealand universities.

The research was funded by Massey Lincoln Industry Agriculture Fund (MLAIF). Ethical approval was attained prior to data collection (Application OM1 23/17) by Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika. The research draws from 15 qualitative interviews conducted with students about their experience of a mental-health programme. Programme details, including its development and evaluation, are detailed by Winder et al. (2025) and Knook et al. (2024). The qualitative interviews were framed within an interpretivist epistemology drawing on postmodernism as a theoretical framework for making sense of the data. An interpretivist epistemology involves exploring the subjective meanings behind knowledge and understanding that individuals' experiences are interpreted from within their social context (Patton, 2015).

The interview participants were first-year agricultural students at two universities. Participants volunteered by email in response to requests for interview participants sent out using Moodle, the online learning platform for their courses, which is embedded in the online version of a mental-health programme delivered at both universities. The lead researcher oversaw the recruitment process, due to being in a different faculty and, hence, not involved in teaching any potential participants. This removed potential perceptions of conflict of interest or perceived pressure to participate in the research. After indicating initial interest, potential participants were emailed an information sheet providing further detail about the research and participants' rights. They were also given the opportunity to ask questions prior to giving consent to participate. All those who indicated an ongoing interest were selected. An interview schedule guided

the interview process, with interviews undertaken by Stanley-Clarke and Hay. The use of the interview schedule ensured consistency in the topics discussed and supported an informal interpersonal style consistent with the use of open-ended questions. This facilitated exploration of participant responses about their experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge (Patton, 2015). It enabled a conversation around the topic and meant the interviewer could follow up with the participant using both closed and open-ended questions.

Topics covered in the interview included wellness and farming, participants' wellness, questions specific to the wellbeing programme, and students' knowledge and engagement with support options. Examples of questions included: "What do you think is a farmer's attitude to managing their wellbeing?", "How would you compare your mental wellbeing to others?", and "What do you think is the most important thing for you when thinking about your mental health and wellbeing?" The interviews were approximately 40 min to an hour long. They were undertaken in person ($n = 11$), online using Zoom ($n = 3$), and by phone ($n = 1$). Interviews occurred between August and November 2023. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. To ensure confidentiality, the identities of participants were only known by the interviewers as the pseudonyms were allocated following transcription. All identifiable information was removed, with transcripts de-identified. To ensure trustworthiness of the data, all interviewees were provided the opportunity to check their transcripts and make changes.

Data were analysed thematically based on a process of "sensemaking" through the reflective thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). At the core of sensemaking is understanding the meaning associated with various events. Through the process of thematic analysis, the researchers engaged in inductive analysis with themes spontaneously emerging from the data. This involved Stanley-Clarke manually reviewing the transcripts and considering the data in relation to the research aims, but also in relation to points of interest and new learnings about the well-being of young people studying agriculture. Points of commonality were grouped, and further details were sought from the transcripts in terms of context and meaning. In addition, the transcripts were further reviewed for exceptions or points of contradiction. Once key themes were identified, they were considered in relation to what was already known on the topic. It was during the analysis process that Stanley-Clarke noted a repeated pattern of participants talking about their mothers. These data were grouped and further interrogated for meaning in relation to existing literature and theory.

Findings

The findings detailed in this article were unexpected and emerged from the inductive process of sensemaking as part of the thematic analysis process. All participants discussed how important it was to have someone to talk to when times were tough. For many interviewees, their family, including fathers, mothers, siblings, grandparents, and other family members, were crucial supports and the people they turned to for advice and comfort. Many participants had faced struggles since moving away from home to attend university, including romantic relationships ending, stress from course results, missing out on being accepted for programmes, and adjusting to their new environment. Callie's reflection was typical of others when she reflected on her experiences of homesickness when

moving away to university: *I thought I was really independent, but coming to Uni*[versity] *I'd realised that no, I definitely need my mum and all my friends and like all my family*. As highlighted in Callie's quote, many participants spoke with affection about their mothers and the crucial roles they saw them playing in supporting their wellbeing, alongside adjusting to life and study within the university setting. Specifically, their mothers were key to prioritising their mental wellbeing by providing education about how to look after themselves. These themes are discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

Mothers' roles in relation to students' prioritising their mental wellbeing

Participants reported that their mother was key to ensuring they prioritised their wellbeing by looking after themselves. This included receiving advice about how to eat properly, exercise, and what to do in stressful situations. The social relationship and connection with their mothers provided students access to resources, or social capital, which is crucial in this context for building students' mental-health awareness and wellbeing. Rachel explained that her family had been typical of many other farming families with *a suck-it-up approach*. After her mother began a new position off-farm, she learned more about mental health and wellbeing. Rachel said that as her mother learned more, she brought this home and *had definitely applied it*. Rachel felt this learning was great for the whole family, as the family gained greater awareness of mental wellbeing and normalised conversations about coping strategies. This informed Rachel's own approach to wellbeing.

Tom also grew up in a rural community, surrounded by men, where several family members had lived in silence with mental illness. He spoke with real affection about his mother: *Mums are definitely a big thing … So my mum has always been very, I don't know, just very good at talking and making it normalized, that it is good to talk about everything. Because I don't want to end up like that*. Tom's mother supported him to learn and talk about mental wellbeing in ways that had not been available to previous generations, and he was very grateful for that. Likewise, Lana explained that if it were not for her mother, she probably would not think too much about her mental health and would fall into the typical farmer *get on with it* attitude. She explained that if she did that now, *I would probably have mum on my case. She is very good at making sure you do something about it when you are not feeling too great*.

At least three participants, including Rachel, had mothers working in caring or health professional roles. Kathryn attributed her good knowledge of mental-health strategies to her mother, saying, *I did have a very, I did have a quite a knowledge of it. My mum being a nurse in particular. So she's always been aware of how we are like what we're doing*. Declan's mother was also engaged in a role related to mental health and wellbeing. He explained that this informed the knowledge he had and the approach he now took to his wellbeing, stating, *A lot of that was influenced by my mum*. For Rachel, Declan, and Kathryn, having mothers employed in roles that required them to have knowledge of mental health meant this transferred to their home lives and the messages they taught their children.

Amber's mother taught her strategies and techniques to maintain both her mental and physical wellbeing. Amber felt this contributed to a strong belief in her *sense-of-*

self. She provided examples of what her mother taught her, saying, *Like positive affirmations and feeling like it is a safe space within my head and everything, that I am ok, that I am loved by myself and that kind of thing*. Amber's mental wellbeing was informed by the messages she learned from her mother; *That's probably the most important … Like pushing how important that is to like, as a woman, as a person, to be like really confident in yourself and like love yourself. So yeah, that came from her!* The most meaningful wellbeing messages that informed these participants' daily lives were those delivered by their mothers. This education, and connection, around mental wellbeing strategies that included positive messages about self-care, were reinforced while participants still lived at home, which transferred to their lives at university.

Mothers as emotional support

Alongside lessons they learned from their mothers about mental wellbeing, participants discussed how important their mothers had been to their settling into university life and providing ongoing support with adjusting to their new environment and its challenges. Participants explained they were in regular and frequent contact with their mothers, reaching out by text, phone calls, through social media platforms and by email. For Callie and others, their mothers were the first person they turned to for emotional support. Callie commented, *me and mum are super close*. When asked how confident Callie was at reaching out for support, her reply was, *If it's from mum, then yep, confident as. I guess me and mum have been through so much together now, so it's like, you know, … . Probably outside of mum, not very confident*. Callie said the closeness and familiarity of their relationship was important to her as she moved away from home. She knew she could call her mother and that she would know from the tone of her voice that Callie needed support, saying, *Or I would message mum and be like, "I'm not having a good day", or something* and her mother would reply.

Participants disclosed they knew their mothers would be there for them, no matter what. Amber said, [mum's] *been a huge advocate, especially me being the only daughter in my family too*. Kathryn was very close to her mother and detailed that her everyday chats and check-ins through phone calls and messages really were important. *I call my mum every morning, every night, during the day, whenever I have good news …* Kathryn had been quite homesick, moving to university away from her home, family, and friends and felt that connection and support from her mother, despite their physical distance from each other, was important. *Yeah. So she* [mum] *went through the same process, the whole homesick, so she knows. I think it helps because she knows how I'm feeling, she knows what I'm going through*. Naomi also found talking to her mother reassuring, as her mother supported her no matter what saying, *mum's like, if you are happy, I am happy*. Like the other participants, Tom commented that his priorities for his emotional wellbeing were, *Exercise. Exercise has always been a big thing for me. And then talking to my mum probably*. Connecting with their mothers through phone calls, messages, and other platforms was important to these university students as they adjusted to life outside the family home, where they learned who they were and their place in the world.

Giving advice

Participants also spoke about challenges they faced during their first semester away from home at university. For several, their mothers provided important advice about what courses to take, who to spend time with, and how to navigate new situations they were encountering at university. Mothers' advice supported these first-year students to navigate a difficult time. Lana spoke about her experience. *Last semester was not great. This one has been good … There was probably some people in my life that bring me down a little bit. So sort of recognized that and fixed it … Mum was the one who told me what I needed to do!* Lana turned to her mother for advice as she learned to navigate her new environment and complicated social relationships. Kathryn gave the example of her mother advising her not to take chemistry and to take an easier elective:

> *My mother talked me into that* [not choosing chemistry as it was too hard]. *I was going to do it. But I'm glad my mother talked me out of it.* She went on to say: *I'm very much if there's a problem, I'll call mum. Okay. I'll call mum … I say something to her and she goes, I told you this. And I say yes. And I know in every situation, it's always mum's always right … It's because it's like, it's the whole idea that parent mum's always right. Mum's always right. Mum's always right. The fact is it's actually true. It's like, I don't want you to be right all the time mum.*

Being able to consistently rely on their mothers for non-judgemental advice during a time of change and transition supported students in establishing identities and navigating the burden of making important academic and career decisions. Having their mothers to share this with them enabled students to feel supported and confident in their choices.

Discussion

This research has implications for understanding the role of maternal influences as protective mechanisms for first-year agricultural students' mental health and wellbeing. Young people, especially those from rural communities, have increased mental health and wellbeing vulnerability due to their geographic isolation and cultural resistance to help-seeking (Rose et al., 2024; Rudolphi et al., 2020; Wheeler & Lobley, 2022; Winder et al., 2025). Growing and supporting the wellbeing of future farmers and rural professionals builds resilience and is likely to affect rural communities (Knook et al., 2024; Winder et al., 2025). In agreement with the New Zealand Farmstrong (2019) report, which found parental support is important for those under 35 working on farms, this research found that the support of mothers was valuable to first-year agricultural students during their first year of university study.

Research details the stress experienced by young people during their transition to tertiary study (Dotterer, 2022; Doyle & O'Donnell, 2022; Parker et al., 2023; Sax & Weintraub, 2014). As noted in this research, the stigma associated with discussing mental wellbeing remains prevalent in farming families and across rural communities (Rose et al., 2024; Rudolphi & Berg, 2024; Stanley-Clarke et al., 2024). A key finding of this research is the important role mothers play for first-year agricultural students in supporting their mental health and wellbeing. By uncovering the role mothers play for first-year agricultural students, educators and researchers may further consider how mothers

support young people as they transition to early adulthood. Stanley-Clarke (2019) discuss the role farm professionals can play in recognising and supporting farmers. As many young people transition into careers in the agricultural sector and engage with vulnerable communities, building their resilience may lead to increased confidence in discussing mental health and wellbeing, further reducing stigma and barriers to mental health wellbeing across the agricultural sector (Wilkes & Burns, 2019).

As young people transition away from home, many continue to rely on their parents for support and guidance about education decisions and career choices (Dotterer, 2022; Doyle & O'Donnell, 2022; Parker et al., 2023). Young people in contemporary society are more connected than ever through the ease of online communication. Parker et al. (2023) note that family support may be vital to helping students adjust to life at university, cope with stress and succeed within this setting. In agreement with the literature, participants found it was important to receive non-intrusive and uncritical advice, which they received from their mothers (Joronen & Åstedt-Kurki, 2005; Sax & Weintraub, 2014). Dotterer (2022) discusses that advances in telecommunication mean young people can connect with their family in ways that do not compromise their independence. Additionally, the ease of communication with mothers is particularly important for young adults' life satisfaction (WHO, 2016). This was evident in this research, as participants spoke about the different ways they connect with their mothers and how this provided timely, important, and uncritical support as they navigated the successes and challenges of university life.

A key finding is that mothers were consistently mentioned by the participants in this research. In agreement with Swartz et al. (2011), having mothers' unconditional support built social capital for the participants, contributing to their sense of self, as well as their self-confidence. Social capital theory highlights that access to resources, such as those accumulated through maternal support, facilitate the exchange of information by providing connections for beneficiaries (Coleman, 1988). In terms of mental health and wellbeing, mothers played a key role in providing ongoing support to the young people interviewed, as they transition to greater independence. As social capital theory argues, this key relationship with a significant other provides access to resources, or social capital, as well as increased self-confidence, including positive social and emotional adjustment (Coleman, 1988; Sax & Weintraub, 2014).

Young people felt validated and affirmed in their life choices, but also noted their parents were available to listen and provide support for their independent behaviour and self-efficacy (Dotterer, 2022; Noble & McGrath, 2012). This type of positive communication equips the young person to navigate stressful situations and provides strategies to deal with adverse influences (WHO, 2016). The role of parents expands to provide scaffolding, and be a safety net, as young people develop their own autonomy (Dotterer, 2022; Swartz et al., 2011). Scaffolding, as temporary support, contributes to the building of social capital that supports the young person to develop confidence with navigating challenges, alongside the development of skills and experience supporting them into adulthood (Swartz et al., 2011). The safety net provides temporary intermittent support during difficult times to minimise negative consequences as the young person transitions to adulthood (Swartz et al., 2011). The parenting role, consequently, shifts from parenting dependent children to mentoring emerging adults (Doyle & O'Donnell, 2022). In this research, participants provided examples of their mothers

fulfilling both roles, including daily check-ins and being available to talk. These are examples of scaffolding. Offering advice and support in stressful situations, such as Lana's mother's advice about navigating stressful friendships and Kathryn's mothers' suggestion about which courses to take are examples of the safety net role played by the mothers of participants in this research.

Although mothers are key in supporting young people, rural women are also an at-risk group in the agricultural sector. Women face wellbeing challenges around, for example, traditional expectations regarding childcare and housework (Budge & Shortall, 2023). These can translate into poor sleep and stress about "how to fit everything in" (Farmstrong, 2019). Most rural mental-health support services, however, are designed for men (Shortland et al., 2023). Considering the key role of mothers, further research is required to develop the support services for rural women to continue their role supporting young people. In addition, further research is required with rural young people who do not have their mothers actively involved in their lives to gain an understanding of how the absence of such a relationship may affect their mental health and wellbeing.

The purpose of exploratory qualitative research is to contribute knowledge in relation to a topic area. A limitation of this research, therefore, is that it does not offer generalisability. It does offer proximal similarity for other young people studying agriculture in a university setting. In addition, the findings of the research can contribute to theory building and provide knowledge upon which further information can build. Many participants had mothers working in the helping professions. Helping professionals are known to play roles in promoting health within their communities (Lashley, 2024; McCollum, Kovner, Ojemeni, Brewer, & Cohen, 2017). This may have contributed to these participants' interest in mental health and well-being, as topics discussed at home. It is recommended, therefore, that further interviews occur with other first year students whose mothers are not helping professionals to control for this variable.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to gain a greater understanding of the mental health and self-care knowledge and behaviours of first-year students in agriculture programmes at two universities in New Zealand. While the data generated is applicable to the New Zealand context, there are lessons for an international audience. The findings contribute to knowledge about young people's first year at university and the role mothers play, as educators and providers of protective factors, for young people during their transition to early adulthood. Findings further highlight the important role mothers play in supporting and building social capital for participants. Mothers delivered key messages about mental health, well-being, and self-care, helping to normalise such conversations in their families. This "normalising of the conversation" is critical for rural communities to reduce stigma around mental health and build confidence for help-seeking. Students studying agriculture are often closely connected to rural communities and many will end up in roles within the agricultural sector. This is a sector where there is ongoing concern about suicide, especially amongst younger people "on-farm". Through having a greater understanding of the key supports that young people need during their first year studying agriculture at university, and the vital role their mothers play in connecting them with information, by providing advice and delivering key messages about well-being, we

hope to contribute to a reduction in rural suicide through supporting mental health education in agriculture university programmes.

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