



NUFFIELD
Farming Scholarships

Slamming Doors Open: Pathways into Agriculture through Education, Youth Groups and Consumer Engagement

Written by:

Wallace Currie NSch

June 2025

A NUFFIELD FARMING SCHOLARSHIPS REPORT

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Date of report: June 2025

“Leading positive change in agriculture.
Inspiring passion and potential in people.”

Title	Slamming Doors Open: Pathways into Agriculture through Education, Youth Groups and Consumer Engagement
Scholar	Wallace Currie
Sponsor	MacRobert Trust
Objectives of Study Tour	<p>To attract, develop, and engage both consumers and the future workforce of our sector, this study focuses on four main pillars:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further and Higher Education: Supporting those studying rural and land-based subjects at college and university level • Youth Organisations: Including groups such as the National Federation of Young Farmers (NFYFC), the Young Aquaculture Society (YAS), 4-H (Head, Heart, Hands, Health) and others that offer hands-on experiences, leadership development, and career inspiration • Schools: Advocating for the integration of rural education across the curriculum, ranging from general awareness at the primary level to specialised rural sector courses at the secondary level • Consumer Engagement: Encompassing educational outreach in schools, as well as broader public engagement through social media, mainstream media and television
Countries Visited	Rwanda, Tanzania, Ukraine, USA, Brazil, Netherlands, Switzerland, Japan, Singapore and New Zealand
Messages	<p>Agricultural education must begin early and continue throughout life, from school to career to create confident, capable and connected rural citizens. Youth organisations are more than extracurriculars, they are incubators for leadership, delivering industry-ready skills across farming, aquaculture and beyond. The formal education system in this country needs reform: fewer outdated assessments, more hands-on learning and real partnerships with industry. Consumer engagement is not a luxury, it is a necessity. Farmers must be supported to tell their stories through media and schools so they can create experiences that build trust. The UK cannot afford to treat rural education as a patchwork. A joined-up, nationally supported pathway is needed that works for all learners, wherever they are starting from.</p>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Agriculture is more than a career, it is a culture, a community and a critical component of sustainable Society. Yet in the UK and beyond, pathways into the sector remain uneven, often reliant on pre-existing networks, rural upbringing or sheer luck. This report explores how we can open those doors more widely - starting in schools, supported by youth organisations, strengthened through further and higher education and sustained by consumer engagement.

Based on a study tour of 26 weeks that spanned ten countries and six continents, this report investigates how different nations approach agricultural education and rural engagement. From the integrated agribusiness curriculum in New Zealand's schools to Tanzania's values-based 4H youth programme and the vast embedded Future Farmers of America (FFA) movement in the United States (US), international examples offer valuable inspiration. Each country visited, from Switzerland's dual-track vocational model to Japan's advanced agri-tech research, provides unique insights into how learning, leadership and consumer trust can be nurtured across diverse systems.

The research focuses on four key pillars:

1. **Primary and Secondary Education:** Schools represent the first opportunity to connect children to food systems and rural life. While organisations such as the Royal Highland Educational Trust (RHET) and Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF) Education do incredible work, their reach is limited. Integrating agriculture into national curricula from an early age through science, literacy or geography could embed lifelong understanding and appreciation
2. **Youth Organisations:** Groups like the Scottish Association of Young Farmers Clubs (SAYFC), Yorkshire Agricultural Society (YAS), and 4-H offer life-changing personal development, leadership training and a social route into the sector. Their ability to engage individuals regardless of academic strength, social background or rural connection makes them powerful tools for inclusion and inspiration
3. **Further and Higher Education:** The UK's land-based colleges and universities are already innovating. The NextGen model at SRUC Barony, with its emphasis on portfolio-based assessment and hands-on learning, offers a template for modern agricultural education. However, sector-wide change will require consistent investment, industry alignment and the celebration of vocational pathways as equal in value to academic ones
4. **Consumer Engagement:** Public understanding of farming remains patchy. But from *Clarkson's Farm* to TikTok, agriculture is regaining public visibility. The sector must seize this momentum, engaging the public through schools, social media and accessible storytelling, not just to educate but to connect.

This report does not advocate for one silver bullet solution. Rather, it offers a holistic model where exposure to agriculture begins early, grows through youth and academic experiences and continues into adulthood, as both a career and consumer choice. By combining global insight, practical recommendations and lived experience, it aims to inform future policy and practice, so that entering agriculture is no longer a closed door, but one that is open, supported and slamming shut behind you only to stop the wind.

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DISCLAIMER

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author alone and not necessarily those of the Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust, of the author's sponsor, or of any other sponsoring body.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Agriculture stands at a crossroads. As consumer expectations shift, the industry must strengthen its connection with the public, ensuring future farmers are inspired and consumers are well-informed about food production. My Nuffield Scholarship explores how consumer engagement, agricultural education and rural youth development work together to build a more resilient and connected sector through four key areas:



1. Rural youth organisations – Examining how groups like 4H, Young Farmers and FFA introduce young people to agriculture through school programmes, leadership and hands-on learning
2. Rural education in schools – Exploring how agriculture is embedded in primary and secondary curricula where food, sustainability and land-based careers are central
3. Further and higher education – Investigating post-school pathways that combine academic learning with industry partnerships and practical skills
4. Consumer engagement – Looking at how farmers, businesses and educators use media, outreach and education to connect producers with consumers and future consumers.

This report draws on international approaches to these areas and makes practical recommendations for the UK.

I grew up on a beef and sheep farm on the Isle of Arran, beneath the inactive volcano Ard Bhienn. That upbringing shaped my passion for education, communication and agriculture's future.

I hold a BSc (Hons) in Agriculture, MSc in Food Security and a PGCert in Tertiary and Higher Education. As a former lecturer at Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) and active industry communicator, I have experienced both teaching and storytelling first-hand.

This report combines lived experience, global research and practical insight to help shape a more connected and sustainable agricultural future.



CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND TO MY STUDY SUBJECT

2.1 My Experience in Agricultural Education as a Student

My contact with rural education has shaped close to half of my life. I began studying for a degree in 2014, moved straight into a master's degree and was back on the other side of the classroom just eight months later as a lecturer. Formal education has given me plenty, first as a learner, then as an educator. Teaching students aged 15 to 52, each with their own motivations, has been one of the most addictive, challenging and rewarding experiences of my life. Figuring out how to tailor learning for each person is a puzzle I have come to relish.

When I entered higher education at 18, my priorities were simple: nights at the pub, arrive at 8:59 (never late) and hope to learn by osmosis. Not a solid plan considering I had just failed biology. My goal was survival. Then I met Oak, a 24-year-old who had worked harvests across the US and could tell you anything about almond farming in Australia. While our evenings looked the same, he turned up to class with purpose. He wanted the knowledge, not just the qualification. That mindset changed how I saw learning and changed my outcome.

That experience showed me something important. People who begin with low grades or a laid-back attitude like I did, can still succeed in this sector. Success comes in many forms — income, impact, autonomy, growth and from many starting points.

Still I wanted more practical exposure. I logged just 24 hours of hands-on work and milked six times during my degree. I managed because I had a working farm at home and enough confidence to ask for more. But not everyone does. Especially post-COVID, many learners need structured, built-in experience, not optional extras.

If we want agricultural education to work for everyone, not just those already immersed in the sector, it needs to offer structure, accessibility and opportunity for all backgrounds and personalities.

2.2 The Other Side – what it was like as a Lecturer

In my master's year, I experienced a strong blended learning model. It kept in-person teaching at its core, with virtual platforms supporting assessment and materials. That insight became invaluable when I began lecturing in August 2020, just months into a global pandemic. For me, teaching started entirely online.

Students entering college then had just left school and their development was disrupted. That stage of life, late teens and early twenties is for friendships, discovery and mistakes. I hope no generation is denied that again. Even now, some students show signs of that social delay, not by fault of their own but due to lost moments.



It was tough for staff too. I missed the classroom, the banter, the challenges, the growth in confidence. Those shared human moments were gone. Still, we adapted. Every student had time on the farm, in fact likely more than I had as a student. That proved what is possible with enough determination.

As I settled into the role, I saw frustrations I used to blame on lecturers often stemmed from rigid systems. Budget constraints limited creativity. Instead of being given a sum to use where needed, we might be forced to spend it on something specific, like a topper. Why not buy second-hand and get engineering students to restore it, and use the savings for student tools? Nope, brand new over the value it was to satisfy ringfenced budgets.

Despite the limits, the practical content at SRUC Barony stood out nationally. That was no accident. It came from a dedicated team going beyond what was required. We offered real experience for example student-led stock judging shows, crop trials and industry events. Our internal winner was even placed third at the European Stock Judging Championships in Paris.

But goodwill has its limits. Much of what made these experiences work was not built into contracts. It was built into people.

2.3 What about Youth Organisations?

I used to believe formal education was the only route to success in agriculture and dismissed youth organisations like the SAYFC.

At 25, I joined Lower Nithsdale Young Farmers. Within three years, I held roles as National Communications and Marketing Vice Chair, Chair and Past Chair and was elected to the National Board.

The SAYFC and similar groups offer far more than social events. They teach leadership, confidence, public speaking, governance and rural advocacy. They also open doors to international travel, industry networks and personal growth.

These groups are not optional extras, they are genuine entry points into the sector. They support people from all backgrounds, not just farmers and help build the confidence and skills needed to lead, innovate and connect.

Having visited youth organisations across six continents the message is clear: these spaces consistently grow capable, confident people. If we want to secure the future of agriculture we must invest in them.

2.4 Does Consumer Engagement Play a Part?

How often do we go to shows where both farmers and the public are present only to spend the day chatting to people we already know? We gather in the same busy spot, talking about the weather, wild nights out or whichever government drama is unfolding, while missing the real opportunity: speaking to the public.



Too often consumers are seen as obstacles. They slow the queue at Fairfax and Favor or block the sheep race. But they are also our audience. Shows and events offer vital chances to tell our story and we should be doing it year-round, not just during sun cream season.

Clarkson's Farm has sparked global interest in British Agriculture. Across all ten countries I visited it was mentioned, regardless of language. Shows like *Countryfile* and *This Farming Life* keep farming in public conversation in a positive light. So do digital creators, from YouTubers to TikTokers, although we still need better data on who they are reaching (Buckley et al., 2023).

The most overlooked but powerful route is primary education. It gives us a consistent opportunity to shape how young people think about food and sustainability. If agriculture was embedded in the curriculum we could change the national conversation from the ground up.



CHAPTER 3: MY STUDY TOUR

3.1 6 Continents – 11 Months...and more!

In reality, my Nuffield journey began around three months before officially receiving that famous tie. While in Rwanda and Tanzania, I was offered both my mock interview and a spot on my next visit to the United States, all on the same day.

So far I have visited ten countries with six offering the most relevant insights. By the time the final conference in Aberdeen arrives, that will rise to twelve across six continents. I have even considered the £4,500 G Adventures cruise to Antarctica just to tick off all seven.

Not every country fed directly into my research. Germany and Poland were brief stopovers en route to Ukraine, where my focus shifted to military and food system resilience. Still, institutions like the Odessa Agrarian University are doing remarkable work under pressure.

Brazil hosted our Contemporary Scholars Conference. Susan Clemesha's talk on educating future generations should have been a highlight. Unfortunately, I spent much of the week with dengue fever, COVID-19 and sunstroke - sun cream and mosquito repellent are not interchangeable it would seem!

Singapore was less fruitful than hoped. Despite more than 45 emails and a few good visits, much of it sat outside the scope of this report.

3.2 Tanzania TZ

My experience in Tanzania offered a powerful look at youth-led agricultural education through the lens of 4H Tanzania. While I did not explore formal education systems here, attending 4H's 30th anniversary showed how deeply youth development can embed agriculture into everyday learning.



4H is more than an extracurricular club. In Tanzania, it is closely aligned with schools, offering hands-on agricultural projects like school gardens, livestock care and agroecology, alongside classroom learning. Students do not just study science, they apply it by testing soil pH or planning small enterprises. This turns theory into real-world action.

The celebration was global, with delegates from over ten countries. It confirmed 4H's global power in creating confident, skilled young people, often from non-farming backgrounds. That is key. The programme opens agriculture to anyone, building diversity in background, personality and experience.



The UK could learn from this. While groups like SAYFC and RHET do great work, a nationwide, curriculum-linked youth initiative like 4H would expand opportunity, grow future leaders and bring more young people into the sector with purpose and confidence.

3.3 Rwanda rw

Rwanda changed my outlook, not just on youth development but on life. I had previously interviewed Regis Umugiraneza (Appendix 2) and casually said “stay in touch.” Nine months later I stepped off a plane in Kigali and met someone who has since become a close friend.

I expected a country still reeling from genocide. Instead, I found one of the most progressive and agrarian places I have visited. With no coastline, limited tourism and big ambitions, Rwanda makes things work, especially in contrast to more resource-rich nations.

After SAYFC’s delegation visit to Tanzania, our team continued to Rwanda where we met



with the Rwandan Youth Agribusiness Forum (RYAF). Founded in 2016, RYAF now supports over 4,000 young people across 30 districts. It is youth-led, peer-driven and government-endorsed, a rare combination.

We visited businesses like CARL Group, co-founded by Regis (he’s the R in CARL), which

produces VitaBread, a sweet potato bakery product now part of Rwanda’s national nutrition strategy. We saw Eza Neza, a hydroponic agritech startup run by Christian Irakoze and several youth-led farms and innovation hubs.

The Rwandan Youth Agribusiness Forum provides more than training. It offers leadership development, enterprise support and a political voice. SAYFC renewed its Memorandum of Understanding with RYAF during our visit, a proud moment that deepened our ongoing partnership.

This model works. It is structured, scalable and embedded in national policy. Compared to the UK’s fragmented efforts, Rwanda shows how coordinated, youth-led systems can transform the future of farming.



3.4 United States of America us

Everything is bigger in the US, from my 2,960 kcal Denny's breakfast to the scale of agricultural education. The National FFA Convention in Indianapolis was the most energising educational event I have ever attended. Over 70,000 students arrived in iconic blue jackets, representing every state and their own school-based FFA chapter.



Future Farmers of America forms one part of the US Three-Component Model of Agricultural Education, alongside classroom learning and Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE). With over 945,000 members across 9,000 plus chapters, nearly one in fifteen US high school students is involved. These are not just agriculture students - they are future leaders.

Supervised Agricultural Experience allows students to run practical or entrepreneurial projects in everything from livestock to drone scouting. Supported by mentors and assessments, they learn real technical and business skills. Future Farmers of America is fully embedded into schools and student officers manage chapters like real organisations, planning events, budgets and communications.

They also run service projects, sustainability campaigns and mental health initiatives. A structured ladder of leadership takes students from local to national representation. Future Farmers of America hosts more than 25 Career and Leadership Development Events, covering everything from food science to floristry.

Agricultural communications is another standout. American students can take it from school to university, gaining media and storytelling skills within an agricultural context. Their approach prepares students to not only produce food but explain it, clearly, creatively and credibly.

The UK is beginning to catch up. Scotland's Rural College now offers a microcredential in Agricultural Communications and Journalism. In a world of misinformation, this kind of training is not a luxury, it is a necessity. Refer to Appendix 3 for a podcast on this topic.

3.5 Netherlands NL

The Netherlands showcased one of the most practically integrated models of agricultural education and consumer engagement I encountered. At Aeres Hogeschool Dronten students farm their way through university, rearing livestock and crops, then processing and selling products within the campus ecosystem. Milk and meat go to the canteen, barley and dairy



are transformed by food tech students into cheese, kefir, yoghurt, baked goods and even beer. These are sold on-site to subsidise costs and reinforce ownership of their work.

Accommodation is reduced through farm placements. Students see their products on shelves and meals, knowing their labour directly supports peers and the system.

A visit to De Westfriesedijk sheep dairy near Zwolle stood out. Visitors watch sheep being milked through glass and enjoy sheep milk ice cream on-site. This is simple, transparent engagement that builds trust and connection.

At Beleefboerderij De Elihoeve, Nuffield Scholars Judith and Rick de Vor combine a working dairy with an educational classroom. Urban visitors engage with the process

before sampling the products, countering misinformation and reconnecting people with their food.

Aeres also houses Warmonderhof, which offers a biodynamic and regenerative farming programme grounded in soil health and ecological systems.

These models exemplify how education, enterprise and transparency can combine to both teach and connect future generations.



3.6 Switzerland CH

Switzerland is an extremely progressive country, even the flag is a big plus!

Switzerland's dual-track education system is one of the world's most comprehensive models for agricultural learning. The Vocational Education and Training (VET) system allows students from age 15 to split their time between classroom study and hands-on experience on farms or agri-businesses. Around two-thirds of young people choose this route, gaining a Federal VET Diploma that leads to skilled employment or higher education.



Students typically spend three to four days a week on-site with a host business, supported by formal education the remaining days. For agricultural learners that could mean livestock care, crop trials, or soil testing. Those pursuing a Federal Vocational Baccalaureate can progress to university or technical colleges.

I observed this in action at ETH Zurich and smaller vocational schools tied directly to working farms. Students learn in context, from managing environmental regulations to running regenerative systems. Compared to other countries, Switzerland's system is the most nationally coordinated and career focused I encountered.

Crucially it also promotes innovation. Many graduates return to farms with the confidence to diversify or start agri-tech ventures. This approach blends maturity, skills and purpose and offers a flexible, employer-linked model the UK would do well to consider.

3.7 Japan JP

My time in Japan centred around Kyoto University, one of Asia's top institutions and home to more Nobel laureates than any other university outside Europe and North America. The graduate School of Agriculture stood out immediately: only 22 students were enrolled, yet they had entire buildings, laboratories and resources dedicated to their research.

I met leading academics like Professor Mikio Umeda, developing autonomous agricultural robots, Professor Hiroki Tamura who is pioneering in-ovo chick sexing before sentience develops and Professor Sohta Inoue, whose sensors detect fruit spoilage before the human eye can. The scientific calibre was astonishing.



But Japan’s agricultural education model is highly academic, elite and research led. Unlike countries where agriculture is embedded in schools, communities and youth organisations,



Japan offers little in terms of vocational pathways or public engagement. No grassroots schemes, no equivalents of 4H or FFA, and no hands-on student-led production were visible.

While this system produces brilliant innovation, it lacks breadth. There is minimal focus on preparing young people for careers in food and farming or connecting

consumers to producers. I left inspired by their technical excellence, but knowing this model, while powerful in its own way, is not what the UK needs to grow widespread agricultural participation.

3.8 New Zealand nz

New Zealand offers one of the clearest examples of agricultural education embedded into national development. At its heart is Lincoln University,



one of the country’s two specialist land-based universities and consistently ranked in the world’s top 100 for Agriculture and Forestry. It educates over 3,000 students with a focus on practical, research-driven learning.

But the pipeline starts far earlier. In 2016, Kerry Allen helped launch the Agribusiness in Schools (AIS) programme, now active in

over 120 schools. It integrates science, finance, marketing and sustainability through real-world primary industry challenges. Agribusiness in Schools students are 3.6 times more likely to pursue agriculture degrees.



This head start is clear. At St Andrew's College in Christchurch, 14-year-olds understand genetics, pasture management and agri-finance, content I taught 18-year-olds in the UK.

The Food and Fibre Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) strengthens this pipeline, bringing together educators, iwi (a Māori Society) and employers to co-design sector-aligned training. It ensures tertiary courses are linked to real-world careers.

Lincoln's farm-based teaching drives learning home. Students conduct soil tests, pasture walks and yield analysis, with 14-year-olds operating drones confidently. Programmes like Owl Farm, Kowhai Farm and the Biological Husbandry Unit embed organic, commercial and sustainable systems into daily education.

New Zealand's joined-up approach from early years schooling all the way through to full time employment training, builds work-ready, confident agricultural graduates.



CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS...I THINK!

When I began this journey, my objectives were vague at best, made up on the spot during my Nuffield interview. But through travel and reflection, four core aims took shape: to explore how schools introduce rural awareness, how youth groups build identity and aspiration, how academic institutions deepen sector understanding and how all three can help consumers relate to food systems, not just learn about them.

Early intervention is key. Neuroplasticity is highest before age five (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000), making early childhood a crucial time to build rural understanding. Nature exposure improves focus, wellbeing and academic success (Gill 2014), while place-based learning strengthens memory and meaning (Davis and Elliott 2014).

The chapters ahead explore how these ideas play out in practice, aiming to build familiarity, aspiration and leadership across the next generation.

4.1 Primary and Secondary Education

For many young people, school is the first structured space where they begin to understand the world. From age three to eighteen, formal education plays a key role in shaping knowledge, attitudes and aspirations, including those related to food systems, farming and the rural economy. Yet across the UK and globally, agriculture's place in the curriculum is often inconsistent and fragmented.

In England, food education is compulsory only from Key Stage 1 to 3 (age five to fourteen) and sits within Design and Technology. It focuses mainly on nutrition and cooking with little attention on food origins, farming systems or agriculture's wider role (Dimpleby 2021).

Scotland follows the Curriculum for Excellence, which uses levels instead of key stages from Early Level through to Fourth Level. Rural topics may be found in Health and Wellbeing, Sciences, or Social Studies, but agriculture is not guaranteed. As in England, its inclusion depends heavily on individual schools, passionate teachers or external support from organisations like RHET or LEAF Education (Aitken et al 2020).

Where rural education does succeed, it is often due to teacher interest, location or third-party involvement. Without national structure, many pupils leave school with only a limited or unclear sense of how food is produced or how farming connects to climate, nature and the economy (Morgan and Sonnino 2010).

Despite this, the opportunity is significant. When well-integrated, rural education boosts environmental literacy, deepens sustainability knowledge and raises awareness of land-based careers. These benefits are strongest when learning is hands-on, localised and continuous throughout schooling (Aitken et al 2020).

Momentum is building. A recent UK Parliament petition calls for agriculture, aquaculture, and rural sectors to be embedded in the curriculum. While not yet policy, it shows public



appetite to link young people more meaningfully with land, food and the environment, an urgent priority in the face of food security and climate challenges (see Appendix 5).

4.1.1 Primary Education

Primary education, from ages five to eleven is a crucial time to build curiosity about rural life, food and the environment. Yet across the UK this opportunity is often missed. A 2022 review by LEAF Education found few primary schools consistently teach farming or food origins (LEAF Education 2022).

Most lessons focus on healthy eating and basic cooking with little attention to where food comes from or the role of farming (Morgan and Sonnino 2008). When mentioned, agriculture is usually abstract and disconnected.

However, the potential is strong. Storytelling, gardens and farm visits help children see food as something grown and made. Research shows farm visits build empathy and understanding (Szczepanski et al 2019). In Scotland RHET has shown early exposure boosts food system memory and career awareness (RHET 2021).

Linking Environment and Farming and RHET events such as food days or farmer talks, can shape future choices (Aitken et al 2020). But access depends on geography, funding and teacher confidence. This creates inequality (Soil Association 2020).

National support could help, with annual farm visits, rural stories and local case studies. Stories rooted in farming boost retention (Davis 2021). Teacher training and digital resources would also improve delivery (Spiller and Vaughan 2019).

Strong rural education at this stage creates not just future farmers, but informed citizens aware of their connection to land and sustainability.

4.1.2 Secondary Education

Secondary education, from ages eleven to eighteen, is a decisive stage where young people begin to form clearer career aspirations and social identities. At this point, exposure to agriculture and food systems can shift from curiosity to genuine interest in future study or employment. Yet across the UK, agriculture remains marginal within the curriculum. In England, Design and Technology and Food Preparation and Nutrition are often the only touchpoints, and these focus heavily on cooking skills rather than food provenance, sustainability, or the science of production (Dimbleby, 2021). In Scotland, the Curriculum for Excellence allows flexibility, but agriculture is rarely prioritised unless a motivated teacher or external partner steps in (Aitken et al., 2020).

This lack of systematic inclusion means many pupils reach the end of secondary education without an understanding of where food comes from, how land is managed, or what opportunities exist within the rural economy. Studies show that teenagers are strongly influenced by practical, real world learning at this stage, and that vocational or applied experiences significantly increase engagement and retention (Mezirow, 1997; Horrillo et al.,



2016). Farm placements, school gardens, and employer partnerships are proven methods to make content meaningful, yet access remains patchy and dependent on local context (Edge Foundation, 2022).

Where secondary education does integrate agriculture, the results are powerful. In New Zealand, the Agribusiness in Schools programme has demonstrated that embedding food and farming into subjects such as science, economics, and geography raises attainment and career uptake (Allen, 2021). Similarly, Switzerland's dual track vocational system shows how combining classroom study with structured farm or agribusiness placements can produce skilled, motivated graduates (Maurer, 2011).

For the UK, secondary school represents both a challenge and an opportunity. Without a national framework, young people risk leaving school disconnected from food and farming. But if agricultural content were consistently woven into STEM subjects, business studies, and social sciences, supported by placements, digital resources, and youth organisations, secondary education could become the critical bridge between early exposure and post school pathways.

4.2 Youth Groups

Youth groups offer a powerful yet often overlooked way to connect young people with the rural world. Operating outside formal education, they create space for creativity, leadership and practical skill development. For many, especially those in urban areas, these groups provide a first meaningful link to food, farming and environmental responsibility (Larson et al 2005).

In the UK, organisations like SAYFC, the National Federation of Young Farmers Clubs (NFYFC) and Youth Action NI offer competitions, exchanges and community projects. The Scottish Association of Young Farmers Clubs alone supports thousands of young people each year, building confidence, rural skills and civic pride (Fasoli and James 2021).

These groups offer more than confidence. They provide real entry points into agriculture through livestock events, travel bursaries and leadership roles. Many members move into careers in agri-policy, marketing or farm management, especially important in a sector often seen as closed to outsiders (Schoon 2015).

Newer groups like the Youth Aquaculture Society (YAS) bring attention to less visible sectors. Through webinars, visits and mentoring, YAS supports youth engagement in aquaculture (YAS 2023).

International models like 4H in Tanzania and FFA in the United States show how youth-led programmes can deliver both education and inspiration (Patton et al 2016; Talbert and Balschweid 2004).



4.3 Academia

It seems that there are three main pillars to academia and this can, for sure be disputed. There is further education (going to college full time and studying 'up to' but not including degree level and the apprenticeships of vocational learning.

4.3.1 Further Education

Further education plays a key transitional role between school and employment or advanced study, blending practical learning with formal assessment. Institutions like SRUC have modernised delivery methods to move beyond outdated, assessment-heavy models. At SRUC Barony, the Next Generation model exemplifies this shift with portfolio-based assessment, hands-on teaching and industry placements, thereby better preparing students for real-world agricultural systems (Wilson and Martin, 2021).

Some colleges now embed sustainability and regenerative agriculture into their curricula, aligning with UN Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2020). Placements help students gain sector-relevant experience and boost employability. However progress is uneven. Remote institutions often face funding shortfalls and limited access to modern facilities or staff (NUS Scotland, 2022).

While government reforms aim to align courses with local economic needs, concerns persist over the long-term sustainability of rural colleges, particularly in areas affected by depopulation (Scottish Funding Council, 2021).

4.3.2 Higher Education

UK universities with strong agriculture faculties, such as Harper Adams, Reading and Nottingham, have increasingly modernised their teaching. Historically, agricultural students often lacked hands-on experience early in their studies, but recent years have seen greater integration of practical systems and external stakeholder collaboration (Leat et al., 2014).

Teaching methods are shifting too. Experiential and scenario-based learning approaches, including flipped classrooms, where students engage with new content at home and apply their understanding through discussions in class, are now more common and shown to improve retention and critical thinking (Kolb and Kolb, 2017). Courses increasingly feature modules on agri-tech, environmental governance and digital agriculture to reflect industry demand (DEFRA, 2022).

However barriers remain. Students from non-rural backgrounds often face challenges accessing placements due to cost or travel constraints (Office for Students, 2021). Meanwhile, applied research is still poorly integrated into undergraduate teaching despite calls for reform (Royal Society, 2023). The SRUC's revalidation demonstrated a successful shift, reducing assessments and linking learning to industry, offering a model that could inspire wider change across the sector (Currie, 2023).



4.3.3 Vocational Education

Apprenticeships provide a practical, accessible route into agriculture, aquaculture and food manufacturing, particularly for those who may not choose traditional academic paths. However, across the UK delivery is inconsistent. Many land-based apprenticeships are treated as secondary offerings, often taught by lecturers juggling full-time course loads, which limits quality (Learning and Work Institute, 2020).

Awarding body for land-based industries in the UK, Lantra reports in 2022 that uptake remains low due to limited awareness, stigma compared to university routes and logistical barriers such as rural isolation or poor employer engagement. Despite this, well-supported apprenticeships can deliver sector-relevant skills and real employment outcomes.

Recent UK education reforms push for greater parity between technical and academic pathways (Department for Education, 2022), offering a chance to reframe apprenticeships as core to future rural workforce planning. In Scotland, the Modern and Technical Apprenticeship frameworks have strong potential but need expanded funding and dedicated tutor support to thrive (Skills Development Scotland, 2023).

If positioned as equal in value to university degrees, apprenticeships could unlock broader participation and build the skilled workforce rural industries urgently need.



CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.1 Towards a Holistic Model of Rural Education

No single intervention will strengthen rural knowledge or transform consumer understanding alone. What is needed is a holistic model; one that spans early education, youth development, further and higher education and public engagement. Early, sustained exposure to agriculture and environmental literacy has consistently been linked with improved academic outcomes, career interest and environmental attitudes (Gill, 2014; Davis and Elliott, 2014).

In the UK, rural education is underrepresented and inconsistently delivered. Where it exists, it is often dependent on enthusiastic individuals or third-party support rather than systemic policy. We need to normalise rural learning throughout education, not treat it as an optional add-on.

5.2 From Patchwork to Pathway

Curriculum inclusion remains fragmented. England offers agriculture only briefly through Design and Technology between Key Stage 1 and 3 (Dimpleby, 2021), and Scotland spreads rural topics thinly across various learning areas (Scottish Government, 2020). In Wales and Northern Ireland, rural learning lacks consistent national direction.

International models show what is possible. New Zealand's AIS reaches over 120 schools (Beef + Lamb NZ, 2024), the Netherlands blends food systems into all levels of education and Tanzania's 4H and the USA's FFA integrate rural learning into everyday school life. These models demonstrate how embedding agriculture from an early age builds leadership, skills and aspiration (Roberts and Ball, 2009).

5.3 Youth Organisations: Building Identity and Leadership

Organisations like SAYFC, YAS, 4H, and FFA are proof that co-curricular learning matters. These groups create space for confidence-building, leadership, and exposure to rural careers. Their power lies in connecting classroom learning with real-world action, through projects, competitions, exchanges and service. They are especially effective at reaching young people who may not thrive in formal education (Larson et al., 2005; Arnold et al., 2016).

Youth-led organisations also make rural learning aspirational. They create culture not just knowledge. If we want to build inclusive, vibrant and diverse rural communities, then supporting youth development must be a priority, not an afterthought.

5.4 Bridging Education and Industry

Further and higher education are gradually shifting from assessment-heavy, siloed models to more integrated, practical systems. The SRUC's Next Generation programme reduced



assessment burden and increased time on placement and in the field, resulting in stronger outcomes (Currie, 2023).

Yet this progress is uneven. Colleges still face funding and staffing constraints. Agriculture is often misunderstood as a “fall-back” option, limiting perception and ambition. Some universities, including Aeres in the Netherlands and Lincoln in New Zealand, show how connecting teaching with industry, communication and international collaboration can create graduates who understand the food system from production to consumer (OECD, 2021).

5.5 Vocational Learning: A Missed Opportunity

Apprenticeships could be a key route into rural careers, especially for those who do not follow academic pathways. But in practice, they are often poorly supported. Delivery is inconsistent and stigma remains around their value (Learning and Work Institute, 2020; Lantra, 2022). Lecturers are overstretched and rural logistics create further access barriers.

Countries like Switzerland offer a better model, one where vocational learners are given parity, pathways and prestige (Gurtner and Fuchs, 2010). With strategic investment, UK apprenticeships could become a cornerstone of rural workforce planning.

5.6 Closing the Loop: Consumer Engagement

Consumer engagement is both an output and input of rural education. Early exposure to food systems improves public trust, reduces misinformation and encourages informed decision-making (Buckley et al., 2023). It also helps producers develop communication skills that are vital in the digital age.

Organisations like FFA teach students how to share their story with pride and professionalism. SRUC’s new microcredential in Agricultural Communications signals a growing awareness that public engagement is part of the job. The next generation must know how to farm, but also how to connect.

5.7 A Strategic National Approach

No one programme can drive transformation alone. The most effective models combine curriculum inclusion, youth development, industry alignment and communication training. In the UK intent exists, what is missing is structure and alignment.

Rural education must be planned nationally, delivered locally and supported consistently. From nursery to university and from clubs to community events, rural learning should be embedded across the full journey. That is how we move from patchwork to pathway and from awareness to action.

It is time we stop asking whether rural education should be in our schools. It is time we start planning how to deliver it, together.



CHAPTER 6: RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Integrate Rural Learning into Curricula

Each UK nation should embed rural themes, including food production, sustainability and natural resource management throughout primary and secondary education. This should include seasonal and practical activities aligned with national curriculum goals, starting from early years through to senior phase. Consistent exposure builds long-term awareness of food systems and the rural environment.

6.2 Connect Youth Groups to Education

Organisations like SAYFC and YAS should be formally recognised within education policy and supported by schools and local authorities. Aligning their programmes with curricular outcomes would give students recognition for participation and encourage broader engagement. These groups promote leadership, skills and confidence that formal education often cannot.

6.3 Reform Further and Higher Education

Further Education and HE institutions must be resourced to move away from outdated, assessment-heavy models and towards portfolio-based, hands-on learning. The SRUC NextGen model demonstrates how this can improve outcomes. Stronger links with industry are essential to ensure graduates are equipped for real-world challenges across the food chain.

6.4 Elevate Apprenticeship Status

Apprenticeships should be viewed as equal to academic routes. More funding, tutor time and employer support are needed to improve delivery and perception. Campaigns must promote apprenticeships as pathways to skilled, future-ready careers rather than fallback options.

6.5 Coordinate National Efforts

A UK-wide taskforce should coordinate strategy, sharing best practice and supporting consistency across the nations. This would reduce duplication, improve visibility and help scale effective models like FFA and AIS in locally relevant ways.

Together these actions will make rural education central to citizenship, sustainability and the future of food, not a peripheral concern, but a national priority.



CHAPTER 7 : AFTER MY STUDY TOUR

Since completing the primary travel phase of my Nuffield journey, I have shifted focus from observation to contribution. While I have stepped back from leading the rural education petition I helped initiate, I remain proud of its progress and the team driving it forward. The growing support highlights public readiness to embed agriculture, aquaculture and rural skills into UK education, signalling momentum if not yet mandate.

Building on this, I have begun advising higher education institutions on modernising delivery, drawing on international models and the portfolio-based, placement-driven approach piloted at SRUC. These systems reduce assessment pressure and foster real-world competence, aligning with constructivist learning principles (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Kolb, 1984).

Looking ahead, I plan to teach at Qingdao Agricultural University in China. This marks a shift from observing to contributing, embedding myself within a different education system to learn by doing. International immersion strengthens reflective practice and pedagogical agility (Leask, 2009; Montgomery, 2018), preparing me to support diverse learning environments more effectively.

This is not the end of my Nuffield journey. There is no such thing as a past Scholar. I intend to keep learning, sharing and pushing for a future where rural education is embedded, respected and transformative, both for learners and the land.



CHAPTER 8: ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND THANKS

I think this is always the fun bit.

There are so many people to thank who have supported me throughout this journey.

Claire Taylor deserves an early mention. Her success the year before inspired me to think, “You know what? Let’s go for it.” Neil McGowan was an incredible help, taking the time to talk me through the process for over two hours before I even began writing. After our second call, which lasted even longer, I completely changed my topic – and I mean *completely*.

To Paul, Linsey, Jane and Katie, you know who you are. You were the first people I told about being offered the mock interview, and you made it feel like such a big deal. I will never forget sitting together in Room 3 of our hotel in Kigali, celebrating that moment.

To the, I think 13 people on my interview panel, whether you spoke or not, thank you. It was a phenomenal experience and a privilege to be in that room.

To the Class of 2024 – what a team! The support group we have formed is something truly special and you are all so deeply valued.

To my family and friends – thank you for being there through it all. And although we are no longer together, Yasmine also played a meaningful part in this journey.

To the more than 200 people who welcomed me into their homes, businesses and lives across the world. Your generosity and openness made this experience what it was.

A special thanks to the wonderful Carla, Gregory and Peter for their help with editing my report, especially for helping me (begrudgingly) cut down the word count! On top of this Sara for the final tweaks as well!

To Heather Wildman - although our chats have mostly been over events and steaks, your mentorship and willingness to be a sounding board have been invaluable.

And finally, to the many friends I have made along the way, including David Rose, who has helped shape the Nuffield podcast. I could list so many more, but please know how much I appreciate every single one of you.

Thank you.

PS: If this has been of interest to you and you would like to read more, there is a 16,000 word version. Feel free to get in touch to be sent it!



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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Further Insight into 4H through Podcast

Currie, W. (2024). R2Kast - Maddy Bretey-Smith on Civic Engagement and 4H. [Podcast] Interview with Maddy Bretey-Smith, Civic Engagement Leader, Iowa 4H. Available at: <https://open.spotify.com/episode/4U4Xlij8fVJALduOFwDHdW?si=cH2YbXn-SaC4K9adLUsi8Q>

Appendix 2 – Podcast with Regis Umugiraneza

Currie, W. (2024). R2Kast - Regis Umugiraneza on Food Innovation and Resilience in Rwanda. [Podcast] Interview with Regis Umugiraneza. Available at: https://open.spotify.com/episode/2LgaAX9BtG4UeRZ5sKSi9S?si=jLAmEFa3Q_ecvhyrhib8_w

Appendix 3 – Interview on Ag Communications in the USA

Podcast interview with Jeff Miller and Craig Davison, Department of Agricultural Education, Purdue University. Discusses ag comms education, student pathways, and industry integration.

Link: <https://open.spotify.com/episode/0bpt9HFPYEgj5QiEvPwLks?si=F8CKUgdTRHa4O6Nc0Ta0fg>

Appendix 4 – FFA Convention Map of Attendee States

Photograph of the SRUC “Tell Us Where You’re From” map board showing pins placed by students from across the United States at the 96th National FFA Convention, 2023.

Image Source: Author’s own (Currie, W.)





Appendix 5 – Petition on Rural Education

Integrate agriculture, aquaculture, and rural industries into the UK school curriculum. [UK Parliament Petition] Available at: <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/700029>

Appendix 6 – Podcast with Andrew Richardson

Currie, W. (2024). R2Kast – Andrew Richardson on youth engagement in aquaculture.

[Podcast] Interview with Andrew Richardson. Available

at: https://open.spotify.com/episode/1zG7pkePIYDYuHGE17tH5D?si=-uT9zigYTc2rKq_4RXVFwg

Appendix 7 – Rwanda – Everything I Saw!

Currie, W. (2024). Rwanda – Everything I Saw! [Instagram Story Highlight] Available

at: <https://www.instagram.com/s/aGlnaGxpZ2h0OjE4MDU2MjY4NjlyNDQ3NTQ0?igsh=MTVqNTh1cjlhcmNuZA==>

Appendix 8 – Tanzania – Everything I Saw!

Currie, W. (2024). Tanzania – Everything I Saw! [Instagram Story Highlight] Available

at: <https://www.instagram.com/s/aGlnaGxpZ2h0OjE4MDMwMTM5OTg0NTE0Njg2?igsh=MTN5ZzAzbnAwb3Vpeg==>

Appendix 9 – USA – Everything I Saw!

Currie, W. (2024). USA – Everything I Saw! [Instagram Story Highlight] Available

at: <https://www.instagram.com/s/aGlnaGxpZ2h0OjE3OTU4NDEwODY3NjY1MDcx?igsh=cWxjazN0eXliYzB0>

Appendix 10 – Brazil – Everything I Saw!

Currie, W. (2024). Brazil – Everything I Saw! [Instagram Story Highlight] Available

at: <https://www.instagram.com/s/aGlnaGxpZ2h0OjE4MDE4NDQ5ODE2MTE2MjYz?igsh=MW13NzBibjA4ZTc3dQ==>

Appendix 11 – Switzerland – Everything I Saw!

Currie, W. (2024). Switzerland – Everything I Saw! [Instagram Story Highlight] Available

at: <https://www.instagram.com/s/aGlnaGxpZ2h0OjE3OTEwNzQ4NjU1OTQwMTU5?igsh=MXIzNGJuMm5iOHU2eg==>

Appendix 12 – Netherlands – Everything I Saw!

Currie, W. (2024). Netherlands – Everything I Saw! [Instagram Story Highlight] Available

at: <https://www.instagram.com/s/aGlnaGxpZ2h0OjE4MDc1NzEzNjk4NDYzOTI4?igsh=MWl4emt6aW15NDY5YQ==>

Appendix 13 – Ukraine – Everything I Saw!

Currie, W. (2024). Ukraine – Everything I Saw! [Instagram Story Highlight] Available

at: <https://www.instagram.com/s/aGlnaGxpZ2h0OjE4MDc1NzEzNjk4NDYzOTI4?igsh=MWl4emt6aW15NDY5YQ==>

Appendix 14 – Japan – Everything I Saw!

Currie, W. (2024). Japan – Everything I Saw! [Instagram Story Highlight] Available

at: <https://www.instagram.com/s/aGlnaGxpZ2h0OjE4MDU4NjYzMzYzNjI4MzQ4?igsh=MTRkd3NhZnBlazg5eQ==>



Appendix 15 – New Zealand – Everything I Saw!

Currie, W. (2024). New Zealand – Everything I Saw! [Instagram Story Highlight] Available

at: <https://www.instagram.com/s/aGlnaGxpZ2h0OjE3ODcwOTQ2MDM2MTE1ODUx?igsh=MW5zMmR3eTY2ZzRueQ==>



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