



# Report of External Evaluation and Review

EcoQuest Education Foundation Te  
Rarangahau Taiao trading as  
EcoQuest Education Foundation

Highly Confident in educational performance

Confident in capability in self-assessment

Date of report: 14 June 2011

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# Purpose of this Report

*The purpose of this external evaluation and review report is to provide a public statement about the Tertiary Education Organisation's (TEO) educational performance and capability in self-assessment. It forms part of the accountability process required by Government to inform investors, the public, students, prospective students, communities, employers, and other interested parties. It is also intended to be used by the TEO itself for quality improvement purposes.*

## Introduction

### 1. TEO in context

Location:	1204 East Coast Road, Kaiarau, Hauraki
Type:	Private training establishment; registered as a charitable trust in 2008
First registered:	1999
Number of students:	No domestic students International: 25 students per semester full time
Number of staff:	Six full-time equivalent and four part-time staff
Scope of active accreditation:	EcoQuest delivers the EcoQuest Education Foundation Semester Programme (Level 6) consisting of the following papers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ecology and Biogeography of New Zealand (5 credits)</li><li>• Restoration Ecology and Ecosystem Management in New Zealand (4 credits)</li><li>• Environmental Policy, Planning and Sustainability in New Zealand (3 credits)</li><li>• Applied Directed Research in New Zealand (projects) (4 credits)</li></ul>
Sites:	One site in Kaiarau, Hauraki
Distinctive characteristics:	EcoQuest Education Foundation delivers undergraduate programmes in partnership with the Department of Natural Resources and the Environment, University of New Hampshire, United States of America.

Recent significant changes:	None
Previous quality assurance history:	<p>At the previous quality assurance visit by NZQA, an audit in 2007, EcoQuest Education Foundation met all quality assurance requirements applicable at that time.</p> <p>In January 2011 the TEO was selected for a Validation of Annual Return visit, where EcoQuest provided NZQA with evidence that it continues to meet the policies and criteria for ongoing registration as a PTE. All requirements were met.</p>
Other:	EcoQuest offers undergraduate, study-abroad programmes (semester programme, 15 weeks and summer programme, five weeks). EcoQuest provides communal residential living where sustainable living is given due priority.

## 2. Scope of external evaluation and review

Following a review of available information and a telephone discussion with the director of EcoQuest Education Foundation, the following focus areas were identified for inclusion in the scope of the external evaluation and review:

- EcoQuest and University of New Hampshire Study Abroad Programme.

This is the most significant programme, offered twice a year by EcoQuest.

In accordance with NZQA policy, the scope included the following mandatory areas:

- Governance, management, and strategy
- International student support.

## 3. Conduct of external evaluation and review

*All external evaluation and reviews are conducted in accordance with NZQA's published policies and procedures. The methodology used is described fully in the web document Policy and Guidelines for the Conduct of External Evaluation and Review available at: <http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/providers-partners/registration-and-accreditation/external-evaluation-and-review/policy-and-guidelines-eer/introduction/>*

EcoQuest supplied the evaluation team with a self-assessment summary. One external lead evaluator and one external evaluator visited EcoQuest on site in Kaiaua, Hauraki over one and a half days. While on site, the evaluation team interviewed the director, academic director, lecturers, field staff, student affairs manager, catering staff, and students. The evaluation team also spoke by telephone with the associate dean of academic affairs from

the University of New Hampshire (UNH). Other stakeholders interviewed were a trustee, local iwi representatives, research associates, and the principal of Kaiāua Primary School. The evaluators did not interview any graduates. The evaluation team also viewed a range of documents including an organisation chart, the strategic plan 2010, a grade portfolio, end-of-semester evaluation form, a comprehensive trip planning document, and student meeting minutes.

EcoQuest Education Foundation has had an opportunity to comment on the accuracy of this report, and submissions received have been fully considered by NZQA before finalising the report.

# Summary of Results

## Statement of confidence on educational performance

NZQA is **Highly Confident** in the educational performance of **EcoQuest Education Foundation**.

EcoQuest has very high levels of achievement. All students gained the credits associated with the semester programme. Overall, grades are benchmarked by the associate dean of academic affairs at UNH, who is responsible for vetting the academic rigour of the EcoQuest study-abroad programme. The associate dean validates achievement and provides external review of the programme, materials, and assessments once or twice a year during visits to the PTE. The evidence indicates that this is a robust process which has consistently been applied over a sustained period of time.

Students highly value the experience and teaching at EcoQuest, in particular the opportunities to participate in several field exercises, from alpine to marine ecosystems, balanced with the classroom lecture component. Skills gained include managing their own learning, time management, and beginning to master academic writing. Features of a study-abroad programme include an opportunity to study in a foreign country and experience other cultures, to encourage intellectual and personal maturity and gain new perspectives. There is anecdotal evidence that the EcoQuest programme contributes to all these aspects.

EcoQuest is embedded in the local community and contributes to research programmes which are a major benefit to local iwi: Ngāti Paoa and Ngāti Whanaunga. Service-learning goals also benefit the local community and specific research projects around the country, while providing students with a cultural experience of New Zealand.

## Statement of confidence on capability in self-assessment

NZQA is **Confident** in the capability in self-assessment of **EcoQuest Education Foundation**.

Self-assessment of the programme, content, and course review is systematic and thorough. Field exercises and directed research projects are formally reviewed and discussed after delivery and any improvements identified by field and lecture staff are implemented for the next semester.

There are informal and formal processes for students to feed back about their experiences regularly throughout the 15-week semester and at the conclusion of the programme. There is clear evidence that feedback is reflected on and improvements actioned or suggestions trialled for each cohort.

There are various sources of anecdotal information that indicate longer-term success of the study-abroad graduates which may be attributed in part to the EcoQuest programme. A more systematic collection of, and reflection on, feedback would strengthen self-assessment processes and provide information to inform improvements and future initiatives.

The purpose of EcoQuest as an organisation is clearly more than the academic achievement of credits. This is evident in the vision, mission, and goals of the organisation, which emphasise the sustainable management of natural habitats, New Zealand cultural experiences for learners, and service-learning through applied research. The kaupapa that makes EcoQuest unique is intuitively understood by the directors. Through self-assessment, EcoQuest could more purposefully identify, discern, and articulate its kaupapa so that the understanding could be reflected on, actioned, and reviewed in relation to all aspects of the organisation. More clearly articulating the high-level goals would help ensure the continuation of the organisation's high value to the students, stakeholders, and community.

# Findings<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 How well do learners achieve?

The rating for performance in relation to this key evaluation question is **Excellent**.

The rating for capability in self-assessment for this key evaluation question is **Good**.

All students achieved the credits associated with this programme, and grades awarded are considered sound and robust for a study-abroad programme. This high level of achievement has been evident over a sustained period of time. The directors, who were part of the founding team of EcoQuest, have been offering this 15-week semester programme for 11 years.

There are a number of contributing processes that ensure achievement. Initially, there is the careful and deliberate selection by the UNH director of admissions of the students, who are most often straight-A students with the physical ability and aptitude to be successful at EcoQuest.

Ongoing, close monitoring of achievement occurs formally and informally and takes into account grades and participation in learning. High levels of achievement are in part due to the high ratio of staff to students, in particular the field staff who are available to students seven days a week as they live on site and travel with them. There are also formative and summative assessments occurring throughout the programme. Students are informed of final grades when they return to the USA and their respective universities.

There are various sources of anecdotal information that indicate EcoQuest has a positive influence on the personal development of learners who also learn meaningful skills. During the evaluation no graduates were spoken to and there is currently no formal process for capturing feedback from graduates once they leave New Zealand. Information about the ongoing, successful experiences of these graduates is heard and seen anecdotally and informally reported to EcoQuest primarily by the director of admissions at UNH, who has an ongoing and active involvement with the students. The associate dean of UNH relayed anecdotal information about graduates' success, and EcoQuest receives postcards and Facebook messages from former students. Occasionally, students return to New Zealand to complete further study. Almost all current students the evaluators interviewed had an opportunity to speak with EcoQuest graduates from their respective universities prior to arriving in New Zealand, and all had positive examples to share.

EcoQuest could benefit from more actively seeking this graduate feedback and analysing it for use toward improvements and to understand the key areas in the study-abroad programme that are highly valued by graduates who return to study in the USA. This feedback might also inform EcoQuest's own perspective on what adds value and is worthwhile about the programme and whether this reflects the students' experience.

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<sup>1</sup> The findings in this report are derived using a standard process and are based on a targeted sample of the organisation's activities.



## 1.2 What is the value of the outcomes for key stakeholders, including learners?

The rating for performance in relation to this key evaluation question is **Excellent**.

The rating for capability in self-assessment for this key evaluation question is **Adequate**.

Key stakeholders for EcoQuest are the students and UNH. In addition to gaining the credits for the programme, there is anecdotal evidence that students learn about collaboration and teamwork in academic work and in the day-to-day commitments required when attempting to live sustainably in a communal residential setting. This life experience is valued by the students because it underpins the ethos of the academic work, including learning about their own relationship with the physical environment.

The associate dean at UNH is clear that the relationship and study-abroad programme with EcoQuest has positive outcomes for the university's Department of Natural Resources and the Environment. An external review of the department's undergraduate programmes in environmental conservation studies at UNH was provided to evaluators which supports this view.

EcoQuest is active in engaging with the local community. The goal of service-learning results in EcoQuest selecting some directed research projects for students that support and enrich the local community. Examples include the relationship with Ngāti Paoa and Kaiāua Primary School, and the offer to small community organisations of data monitoring research surveys. These surveys have enabled the regular collection of data at no cost to the community. The directed research projects at Kaiāua Primary School involve working within the Living World curriculum and utilising the local environment. EcoQuest students create a teaching plan and develop resources and materials which they teach to groups of four or five children. Kaiāua Primary School has the curriculum taught and additional resources for the school developed by enthusiastic undergraduates who are supervised by the principal, a faculty member, and field staff from EcoQuest. Ngāti Paoa indicates that there are major gains for them through their relationship with EcoQuest. The directors make available to Ngāti Paoa the staff, knowledge, and research skills to assist the iwi with requests for help and advice on environmental matters. In these ways, EcoQuest is an important resource for Ngāti Paoa. Ngāti Paoa is hoping to develop further initiatives with EcoQuest in the future, for example attending EcoQuest programmes and taking part in a reciprocal study-abroad programme. EcoQuest students gain exposure to New Zealand culture and an insight into relationships with First Nation people.

EcoQuest could benefit from reviewing the process to gather information, including anecdotal, about the outcomes and value stakeholders place on these outcomes. Validating perceptions and anecdotal information through the systematic collection of feedback would strengthen self-assessment in this area and provide information to inform improvements and future initiatives.

### 1.3 How well do programmes and activities match the needs of learners and other stakeholders?

The rating for performance in relation to this key evaluation question is **Good**.

The rating for capability in self-assessment for this key evaluation question is **Adequate**.

The study-abroad programme offered by EcoQuest is both current and relevant. It is imperative that lecturers keep abreast of changes to New Zealand legislation as these may affect the students' research projects. The programme is relevant to the studies most students are undertaking at their respective universities in the USA. Others have a personal interest in ecology and sustainability which they hope to apply to their academic learning in other fields.

Students were unanimous in stating that the expectations and information provided prior to their arriving matched exactly what they are now experiencing at EcoQuest. In particular, students highly value the opportunities for hands-on learning in the field and the integrated theoretical learning that occurs alongside. Students report that all activities are directly related to their studies and are valuable and meaningful.

EcoQuest believes, and anecdotal evidence suggests, that EcoQuest's programme also improves students' motivation, life skills, self-management, personal growth, and cultural awareness. Currently, this feedback is not formally sought. To do so would give a more accurate picture of the students' overall experience and allow EcoQuest to continue to ensure that the purpose and goals of the organisation are achieved. Such feedback would also validate anecdotal evidence.

Most stakeholders who engage with EcoQuest around the directed research projects report mutual benefits. EcoQuest students gain practical experience in a variety of field exercises and ecosystems and are supervised by faculty and field staff throughout. The research projects have enjoyed continuity, with the same lecturers and directors consistently involved. Most directed research projects have been operating for several years.

The consistency and frequency with which all stakeholders are asked for feedback to ensure that the programme and directed research projects met their requirements and needs varied, as did the value of this relationship to the particular community or institute the stakeholders represent. EcoQuest would benefit from either reviewing the process for gathering this information or implementing it consistently so that valuable suggestions on improvement and future initiatives can be reflected on.

## 1.4 How effective is the teaching?

The rating for performance in relation to this key evaluation question is **Excellent**.

The rating for capability in self-assessment for this key evaluation question is **Good**.

Students have high praise for field staff and lecturers. Teaching staff use a variety of modes of delivery. Each paper's subject matter incorporates relevant political, social, and legislative views which are integrated into all programme activities. Informal opportunities for learning are potentially always present. This is primarily because field staff are accessible seven days a week, some living on site and sharing meals and facilities with the students. The students' perception is that all staff are well informed academically and are passionate about ecology and sustainability.

Students enjoy the varied teaching styles, the holistic view of their education, and the integration of programmes. There are frequent formative and summative assessments including exams, quizzes, journal writing, and assignments. Grades are reported back to students with a two-week turnaround. There is anecdotal evidence of improved academic writing, self-motivation, and taking responsibility for own learning, which is a new experience for most of the students. There is reliable review of the programme by the associate dean at UNH who benchmarks this study-abroad programme with others and visits EcoQuest once or twice a year, going into the field with students to assess both academic and practical field exercises and directed research projects.

Regular staff meetings occur. After every field exercise and at the end of the semester there is a staff debrief aimed at programme improvement. These debriefs include specific student feedback which is collected and considered. The evaluation team saw documented examples of improvements that had been made to field exercises and curriculum design and delivery based on feedback received.

Students consider that the teaching staff are their primary resource and all teaching staff are well qualified in their respective fields. Opportunities for professional development are predominantly internal/in-house and utilise the expertise of EcoQuest staff. EcoQuest is able to access UNH library resources, publications, and materials from the professional memberships held by EcoQuest and staff. Research associates interviewed suggest improved links into New Zealand universities would benefit EcoQuest academically.

Seeking stakeholder input beyond the students and the UNH, such as the participants in the research projects, could enable EcoQuest to be further informed and positioned to respond to stakeholder needs with respect to the effectiveness of the teaching.

## 1.5 How well are learners guided and supported?

The rating for performance in relation to this key evaluation question is **Excellent**.

The rating for capability in self-assessment for this key evaluation question is **Excellent**.

The pastoral care of students in NZ is commendable. Key processes that support students were identified. These include contact with the admissions manager at UNH and the knowledge, passion, and accessibility of EcoQuest staff. The relationship between the UNH director of admissions and students was identified as significant both prior to arriving in New Zealand and on return to the USA. The evaluation team noted in particular the robust selection process and frank and honest discussions that occur with prospective students, as well as the continuous follow-up and genuine concern for students to determine whether they are a good candidate for the programme. A number of students identified this relationship as a significant reason for choosing this study-abroad programme.

Students on site have physical access to EcoQuest field staff 24 hours a day. During breaks and over weekends there is plenty of guidance for students on how to use their own recreation time. EcoQuest field staff will often accompany students on away trips, transporting them to and from activities. There is an understanding of the undergraduate American student at EcoQuest. Their cultural preferences are considered and are appropriately provided for. For example, Thanksgiving is celebrated with authentic food. Current students said all their needs “had been anticipated”.

There are formal processes for students to provide feedback about the programme content and delivery via questionnaires and evaluation forms. Students as a group also have a weekly opportunity to meet with the student affairs manager to bring up any concerns they may experience while living and studying at EcoQuest. This is particularly important because for many students, attempting to live sustainably and taking responsibility for tasks associated with this is a new experience. Also, there can be challenges in residential and communal living with people who are strangers at the beginning of the programme and living far from home. Minutes are kept of these meetings and requests or concerns are relayed to the management for action. The evaluators heard of several examples where students’ needs had been heard and actioned in a timely way.

## 1.6 How effective are governance and management in supporting educational achievement?

The rating for performance in relation to this key evaluation question is **Good**.

The rating for capability in self-assessment for this key evaluation question is **Adequate**.

The EcoQuest trust board comprises four members: the two directors and two other trustees, one with a focus on business affairs and the other with a focus on legal affairs. Two trustee positions are currently vacant. The trust board has positive relationships with UNH and there is a clear strategic plan which indicates possible future initiatives that may be pursued.

Although the trust board is governing a small PTE, there is limited representation at governance level of crucial stakeholder relationships in this specialised area of programme

delivery. EcoQuest operates without input from a formal advisory board, instead utilising various associates on an as-needs basis. Performance review of the trust board and directors does not occur systematically. Strengthening either of these aspects would provide the opportunity for the trust board, as the governing body, to be further informed and positioned to respond to stakeholder needs and to check alignment with EcoQuest's own kaupapa.

The two directors are involved in all aspects of the organisation, including teaching. This provides opportunities for good information-gathering and oversight of the daily programme delivery, academic achievement, and student welfare. Feedback is direct to management and any responses or improvements can be implemented immediately. The directors have established positive relationships with staff, local iwi, the local community, and stakeholders who feed back informally to the directors. All people interviewed were very complimentary about the directors, who are well respected professionally and personally.

EcoQuest is very confident in the programme it provides and has 11 years' experience of fine-tuning processes and systems that are effective and support the high achievements of the students. EcoQuest also has a number of initiatives in the early stages of development. The directors are clear that the intention is for EcoQuest to continue beyond their own involvement. Future-proofing the PTE, not just for key positions or roles but in identifying the attributes that are anecdotally reported as important to students, needs to be considered. An example would be to understand how a change in personnel, such as the admissions manager at UNH or a director at EcoQuest, might affect the kaupapa of the programme.

# Focus Areas

*This section reports significant findings in each focus area, not already covered in Part 1.*

## 2.1 Focus area: Governance, management, and strategy

The rating in this focus area for educational performance is **Good**.

The rating for capability in self-assessment for this focus area is **Adequate**.

## 2.2 Focus area: International student support

The rating in this focus area for educational performance is **Excellent**.

The rating for capability in self-assessment for this focus area is **Good**.

## 2.3 Focus area: EcoQuest and University of New Hampshire Study Abroad Programme

The rating in this focus area for educational performance is **Excellent**.

The rating for capability in self-assessment for this focus area is **Good**.

# Recommendations

There are various sources of anecdotal information that indicate a variety of benefits of the study-abroad programme at EcoQuest. A systematic collection and reflection on readily available data for self-assessment, and utilising opportunities to ask specific questions so that the data collected is useful, would validate anecdotal evidence and perceptions, strengthening the self-assessment processes. Ultimately, this would inform the organisation and support initiatives for improvement.

# Further actions

The next external evaluation and review will take place in accordance with NZQA's policy and is likely to occur within four years of the date of this report.

# Appendix

## Regulatory basis for external evaluation and review

*Self-assessment and external evaluation and review are requirements of course approval and accreditation (under sections 258 and 259 of the Education Act 1989) for all TEOs that are entitled to apply. The requirements are set through the course approval and accreditation criteria and policies established by NZQA under section 253(1)(d) and (e) of the Act.*

*In addition, for registered private training establishments, the criteria and policies for their registration require self-assessment and external evaluation and review at an organisational level in addition to the individual courses they own or provide. These criteria and policies are set by NZQA under section 253(1)(ca) of the Act.*

*NZQA is responsible for ensuring all non-university TEOs continue to comply with the policies and criteria after the initial granting of approval and accreditation of courses and/or registration. The New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee (NZVCC) has statutory responsibility for compliance by universities.*

*This report reflects the findings and conclusions of the external evaluation and review process, conducted according to the policies and criteria approved by the NZQA Board.*

*The report identifies strengths and areas for improvement in terms of the organisation's educational performance and capability in self-assessment.*

*External evaluation and review reports are one contributing piece of information in determining future funding decisions where the organisation is a funded TEO subject to an investment plan agreed with the Tertiary Education Commission.*

*External evaluation and review reports are public information and are available from the NZQA website ([www.nzqa.govt.nz](http://www.nzqa.govt.nz)).*

*Information relevant to the external evaluation and review process, including the publication *Policy and Guidelines for the Conduct of External Evaluation and Review*, is available at: <http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/providers-partners/registration-and-accreditation/external-evaluation-and-review/policy-and-guidelines-eer/introduction/>*

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