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External Evaluation and Review Report

EcoQuest Education Foundation Te
Rarangahau Taiao (trading as
EcoQuest Education Foundation)

Date of report: 1 February 2019

About EcoQuest Education Foundation

EcoQuest Education Foundation (EcoQuest) is a charitable trust delivering residential programmes in ecology, resource management and environmental policy. It has a long-standing relationship with the University of New Hampshire (UNH), and recently with the Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs (HECUA), a consortium of universities in the United States. The EcoQuest training schemes are offered as Study Abroad programmes for students in the US and are equivalent to one semester of their Bachelor's degree studies.

Type of organisation:	Private training establishment (PTE)
Location:	1204 East Coast Road, Whakatiwai, RD3, Pokeno
Code of Practice signatory:	Yes
Number of students:	Domestic: nil International: 24 (all from the United States)
Number of staff:	Nine full-time equivalents (two directors, three academics, two field leaders, and two office/catering staff)
TEO profile:	See EcoQuest Education Foundation
Last EER outcome:	February 2015: Highly Confident in educational performance Highly Confident in capability in self-assessment
Scope of evaluation:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• EcoQuest Education Foundation Semester Programme (Level 6)• International Student Support and Wellbeing
MoE number:	8255
NZQA reference:	C32630
Dates of EER visit:	28 and 29 November 2018

Summary of Results

EcoQuest's completion rate is exemplary. The institution works with the local marae and community in sustainability campaigns and practices, and with relevant agencies and conservationists through the PTE's applied research programme. EcoQuest is a reflective and improvement-focused organisation.

Highly Confident in educational performance

- Achievement rates are excellent at 100 per cent in 2015, 2016 and 2017, and 96 per cent in 2018.
- EcoQuest has a strict selection process. The students it attracts are academically highly motivated and focused.
- EcoQuest's residential context and low student – teacher ratio lead to high levels of individual attention and support to students.

Highly Confident in capability in self-assessment

- The programme is a balance of theory and applied field work and is effective in engaging the students. Students strengthen their academic skills (particularly research and writing skills) and enhance their cross-cultural understanding and personal resilience.
- EcoQuest students contribute to environmental and ecological research, including some longitudinal studies. Stakeholders confirm the value of engagement with EcoQuest for advances in ecology and sustainability.
- EcoQuest's governance and management has clear strategic vision. Comprehensive plans have been developed to expand delivery in 2019.
- Robust and ongoing programme review ensures the PTE is meeting stakeholder requirements – including that of partner institutions – and student learning needs.
- Self-assessment is embedded in the PTE's operations, and clearly shows the value placed by the institution in its own improvement.

Key evaluation question findings¹

1.1 How well do students achieve?	
Performance:	Excellent
Self-assessment:	Excellent
Findings and supporting evidence:	<p>EcoQuest has an excellent achievement rate – 100 per cent in 2015, 2016 and 2017, and 96 per cent so far in the current year (2018). The institution’s robust assessment and moderation practices ensure the validity and reliability of results data.</p> <p>EcoQuest sets and monitors achievement targets for grade point averages for each course and the programme overall. Individual student performance for each assessment is closely tracked. When results are below the benchmark, the institution responds immediately by providing additional learning support and/or reviewing assessments and delivery.</p> <p>In addition to a broad understanding of ecological and sustainability policies and practices, students gain practical applied research skills and academic writing skills. They also gain cross-cultural knowledge and understanding of the New Zealand context, along with interpersonal and communication skills enhanced by communal living while at EcoQuest.</p> <p>Various systems in place assist the institution in understanding the skills gained by students during the programme. These include formal and informal feedback from students, identification and monitoring of goals, regular formative assessment, and a variety of individual and group summative assessments.</p>
Conclusion:	EcoQuest has very strong student achievement. Data is consistently monitored and analysed to provide information for ongoing improvements.

¹ 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 students?

Performance:	Excellent
Self-assessment:	Excellent
Findings and supporting evidence:	<p>Besides the immediate value for students of a one-semester credit towards their Bachelor's degree, the students' personal transformation is well-evidenced. Students gain different and broader perspectives, improved cross-cultural understanding, interpersonal skills, and increased resilience.</p> <p>Enduring benefits for the students' academic life include improved writing and research skills. Fieldwork may become the foundation of further research work, whether at Bachelor's or postgraduate level, when students go back to the US. The positive experience and strong relationships formed contribute to continuing relationships with key EcoQuest staff and other alumni. This contributes to their professional prospects.</p> <p>Through its research and field work, EcoQuest provides an ongoing contribution to the longitudinal research of various organisations. Stakeholders, which include Auckland City Council, local marae and other conservationists, value EcoQuest's contribution, and the data and analysis assist them in their work and in determining future projects.</p> <p>Students' involvement in local initiatives is community-enhancing. Examples include assistance at the local marae, engagement with local iwi, and participation in tree planting.</p> <p>EcoQuest regularly engages with its partner institutions which provides information and relationships and the perception of the programme as popular and credible. The Study Abroad option consistently meets quality expectations and strengthens the relevant Bachelor's programmes of the partner institutions.</p> <p>EcoQuest's directors and staff have extensive networks in the scientific and local communities who they partner with for the applied field work. Engagement with networks is maintained outside the duration of the research programme.</p>
Conclusion:	There is strong and clear evidence that the value of outcomes for key stakeholders, including students, is high.

1.3 How well do programme design and delivery, including learning and assessment activities, match the needs of students and other relevant stakeholders?

Performance:	Excellent
Self-assessment:	Excellent
Findings and supporting evidence:	<p>The programme’s weekly topic approach involves a mix of classroom and field activities. Programme review includes a weekly debrief, which in turn feeds into the bigger review at the end of each course. The feedback and suggestions from the weekly debriefs lead to changes and improvements in the programme structure and delivery.</p> <p>The partner institution’s academic programme coordinator visits EcoQuest annually and conducts a thorough moderation of the programme. This include review of assessments and marking, ‘ghost’ grading of oral presentations, review of the evaluations of students with faculty members, and discussions with students. The partner institution confirms its confidence in the effectiveness of teaching and assessment at EcoQuest.</p> <p>EcoQuest provides applied research that is useful to stakeholders and meets their needs. The latter’s input is obtained when planning for future research projects that will assist their work.</p> <p>The teaching staff are highly qualified and their research interests are in line with the programme. They meet regularly with field leaders and management to discuss the previous week’s events, plan for the next week of delivery, report on the academic progress of students, and review the programme.</p> <p>Programme resources are adequate and appropriate, including logistical requirements during field work, and the guest speakers are engaging and inspiring to students.</p> <p>Programme delivery and focus are reviewed regularly. The increased emphasis on Te Ao Māori is one example of programme review aligning with organisational strategies.</p>
Conclusion:	EcoQuest has strong processes to ensure that programme design and delivery match the needs of stakeholders, including learners.

1.4 How effectively are students supported and involved in their learning?

Performance:	Excellent
Self-assessment:	Excellent
Findings and supporting evidence:	<p>The hands-on and weekly-topic approach keeps students engaged and stimulated, and allows effective learning.</p> <p>Students are well supported in their learning. For instance, they are given tutorials in academic writing (i.e. referencing) and assistance in managing workloads. They are also given very good formative feedback. One example is the detailed feedback on several drafts of research reports before they are submitted for final assessment. Students also have access to a physical library on site and to online journals, which aid them in their research writing.</p> <p>The induction programme is detailed and very informative. It manages expectations and helps prepare students for their stay in New Zealand. EcoQuest pays close attention to student wellbeing and pastoral care, and closely monitors student satisfaction. Students have good relationships with their teachers and/or field leaders, and can easily approach them or the directors when necessary. They also provide group feedback through their student meetings, and have elected a student representative to speak on their behalf with management. Student end-of-course evaluations are gathered by the organisation, and are documented, analysed and shared appropriately with the relevant people. The survey is very comprehensive and includes feedback on aspects such as tutors, the programme, activities and accommodation.</p> <p>EcoQuest has very thorough and effective systems for monitoring health and safety. The field work logistics are well-organised to ensure risks are managed and that untoward incidents are reduced.</p>
Conclusion:	Students feel well-supported in their learning and in their life in New Zealand. EcoQuest closely monitors students' wellbeing and ensures that they engage in their learning.

1.5 How effective are governance and management in supporting educational achievement?

Performance:	Excellent
Self-assessment:	Excellent
Findings and supporting evidence:	<p>EcoQuest is a well-established PTE with clear strategic direction and vision. There is good alignment between governance and management, which ensures the strategic direction is well-understood and implemented as planned. There are regular, purposeful and minuted meetings and action points.</p> <p>EcoQuest has a newly approved training scheme planned to start delivery in 2019, in partnership with UNH, in a new permanent site in Nelson. Detailed and careful planning for growth ensures that the organisation has the necessary resources in place before expanding operations.</p> <p>Academic leadership is strong and effective. The academic director engages closely with staff, provides academic advice formally and informally, and pre-moderates all assessment materials.</p> <p>Staff feel valued and supported in their professional development. Management is approachable, open to feedback, and improvement-focused. While the delivery model and student feedback ensure management has a good understanding of teacher effectiveness, there is an opportunity to strengthen formal feedback and goal-setting for individual teachers.</p> <p>EcoQuest has extensive industry networks – relationships are maintained with key research stakeholders, local communities, and those in the areas where they conduct field work. These close relationships enable EcoQuest to confirm the relevance of its work.</p> <p>The organisation proved its resilience and strength when it successfully managed the disruption caused by a flood in early 2018. Despite the challenges, EcoQuest was able to continue its regular operations and programme delivery.</p>
Conclusion:	EcoQuest has solid governance and management teams. They work well together and have a shared vision about the organisation. They ensure resources and systems are in place to support educational achievement.

1.6 How effectively are important compliance accountabilities managed?

Performance:	Excellent
Self-assessment:	Excellent
Findings and supporting evidence:	<p>EcoQuest is effectively managing its compliance responsibilities.</p> <p>Training scheme delivery, including the required number of learning hours, matches the NZQA approval. The moderation practices in place are effective and appropriate for the organisation.</p> <p>The organisation conducts thoughtful and thorough self-reviews of its practices against the requirements of the Education (Pastoral Care of International Students) Code of Practice. In addition, EcoQuest strictly monitors HECUA's Code compliance with regards to HECUA-enrolled students, who are based in the PTE's other delivery site in Wellington.</p> <p>Health and safety is a significant responsibility of the organisation, given the nature of its provision. Effective practices are in place to manage risk and keep the students and staff safe, especially during field work. Health and safety is a regular agenda item in staff meetings, and systems are constantly reviewed for improvement.</p> <p>There is close monitoring of the documents that need to be submitted to NZQA on a regular basis, and the records are very detailed.</p>
Conclusion:	EcoQuest manages its compliance accountabilities robustly. Embedded self-assessment practices make it easy for the organisation to manage this responsibility.

Focus Areas

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

2.1 Focus area: International Student Support and Wellbeing

Performance:	Excellent
Self-assessment:	Excellent

2.2 Focus area: EcoQuest Education Foundation Semester Programme

Performance:	Excellent
Self-assessment:	Excellent

Recommendations

Recommendations are not compulsory but their implementation may improve the quality and effectiveness of the training and education provided by the tertiary education organisation (TEO). They may be referred to in subsequent external evaluation and reviews (EERs) to gauge the effectiveness of the TEO's quality improvements over time.

There are no recommendations arising from the external evaluation and review.

Requirements

Requirements relate to the TEO's statutory obligations under legislation that governs their operation. This include NZQA Rules and relevant regulations promulgated by other agencies.

There are no requirements arising from the external evaluation and review.

Appendix

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>. The TEO has an opportunity to comment on the accuracy of this report, and any submissions received are fully considered by NZQA before finalising the report.*

Disclaimer

The findings in this report have been reached by means of a standard evaluative process: <http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/providers-partners/external-evaluation-and-review/policy-and-guidelines-eer/introduction/>. They are based on a representative selection of focus areas, and a sample of supporting information provided by the TEO under review or independently accessed by NZQA. As such, the report's findings offer a guide to the relative quality of the TEO at the time of the EER, in the light of the known evidence, and the likelihood that this level of quality will continue.

For the same reason, these findings are always limited in scope. They are derived from selections and samples evaluated at a point in time. The supporting methodology is not designed to:

- *Identify organisational fraud²*
- *Provide comprehensive coverage of all programmes within a TEO, or of all relevant evidence sources*
- *Predict the outcome of other reviews of the same TEO which, by posing different questions or examining different information, could reasonably arrive at different conclusions.*

² NZQA and the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) comprehensively monitor risk in the tertiary education sector through a range of other mechanisms. When fraud, or any other serious risk factor, has been confirmed, corrective action is taken as a matter of urgency.

Regulatory basis for external evaluation and review

External evaluation and review is conducted according to the External Evaluation and Review (EER) Rules 2013, which are made by NZQA under section 253 of the Education Act 1989 and approved by the NZQA Board and the Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment.

Self-assessment and participation in external evaluation and review are requirements for maintaining accreditation to provide an approved programme for all TEOs other than universities. The requirements are set through the NZQF Programme Approval and Accreditation Rules 2013, which are also made by NZQA under section 253 of the Education Act 1989 and approved by the NZQA Board and the Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment.

In addition, the Private Training Establishment Registration Rules 2013 require registered private training establishments to undertake self-assessment and participate in external evaluation and review, in accordance with the External Evaluation and Review Rules (EER) 2013, as a condition of maintaining registration. The Private Training Establishment Registration Rules 2013 are also made by NZQA under section 253 of the Education Act 1989 and approved by the NZQA Board and the Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment.

NZQA is responsible for ensuring non-university TEOs continue to comply with the rules after the initial granting of approval and accreditation of programmes 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 External Evaluation and Review (EER) Rules 2013. 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). The External Evaluation and Review (EER) Rules 2013 are available at <http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/assets/About-us/Our-role/Rules/EER-Rules.pdf>, while information about the conduct and methodology for external evaluation and review can be found at <http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/providers-partners/external-evaluation-and-review/policy-and-guidelines-eer/introduction/>.

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