



Mana Tohu Mātauranga o Aotearoa  
New Zealand Qualifications Authority

# External Evaluation and Review Report



EcoQuest Centre for Indigeneity,  
Ecology and Creativity

Date of report: 3 May 2024

# About EcoQuest Centre for Indigeneity, Ecology and Creativity

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*Since 1999, EcoQuest has provided residential programmes for undergraduate students from the United States in partnership with the University of New Hampshire (UNH). EcoQuest staff and students contribute to environmental and ecological research in the Waikato and Auckland regions near the EcoQuest Centre at Whakatīwai on the Firth of Thames, as well as further afield.*

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Type of organisation:	Private training establishment (PTE)
Location:	EcoQuest Field Centre, 1204 East Coast Road, Whakatīwai, Waikato
Eligible to enrol intl students:	Yes
Number of students:	Domestic: nil International: 56 students, 25.5 equivalent full-time students in 2023
Number of staff:	16 full-time, three part-time; 17.6 full-time equivalents
TEO profile:	<a href="#"><u>EcoQuest Centre for Indigeneity, Ecology and Creativity</u></a>  EcoQuest offers three programmes in collaboration with the University of New Hampshire Study Abroad programme. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• EcoQuest Education Foundation Semester Programme (Level 6) 60 credits on NZQF</li><li>• Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Aotearoa (Level 6) 60 credits on NZQF</li><li>• EcoQuest Education Summer Programme (Level 6) 30 credits on NZQF</li></ul>

Last EER outcome:	In 2019, NZQA was Highly Confident in both EcoQuest's educational performance and self-assessment capability.
Scope of evaluation:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• International student support and wellbeing</li><li>• EcoQuest Education Foundation Semester Programme ID: 105467-1</li></ul>
MoE number:	8255
NZQA reference:	C51156
Dates of EER enquiry:	21-23 November 2023

# Summary of results

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*EcoQuest students achieve strong results in well-designed programmes. Local community and conservation partners benefit from the applied fieldwork and research activity undertaken as part of the programmes. EcoQuest came under significant stress during border closures from 2020-22, and was supported by enduring relationships with UNH, mana whenua, conservation organisations and landowners in the region.*

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- EcoQuest’s residential programme balances theory and applied fieldwork to provide an engaging learning and social experience. Collaborative team-based approaches to learning ensure strong support and high success rates.
  - International students achieve well, with 100 per cent passing their courses (2019-23) and achieving credits for their university degree programmes. Students gain applied fieldwork and substantial research experience and enhance their knowledge of Aotearoa New Zealand ecology and sustainable agriculture.
  - EcoQuest meets the most important needs of learners and collaborative partners. Local community, mana whenua and conservation partners gain significant benefit from the PTE’s educational and research activities.
  - Academic and strategic leadership is effective. A comprehensive draft strategic plan extends EcoQuest’s focus to introduce indigeneity and creativity to the existing programmes and activities.
  - Reflective practice occurs at all levels of the organisation. Comprehensive policies, processes and guidelines support effective teaching, learning, and health and safety practices. Self-assessment is generally well used to guide improvement.
- Highly Confident in educational performance**
- Confident in capability in self-assessment**

# Key evaluation question findings<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 How well do students achieve?

Performance:	<b>Excellent</b>
Self-assessment:	<b>Excellent</b>
Findings and supporting evidence:	<p>Students enter the EcoQuest semester programme as successful degree students who have completed at least 48 credit hours and two courses in related subjects.<sup>2</sup> They must have a grade point average of at least 2.5 to be accepted into the programme. This leads to exceptional success rates on the programme.</p> <p>All students enrolled from 2019-23 passed their courses, with 85 per cent of students passing with a grade average of 86 per cent or above. Students achieve 8 or 16 graded credits<sup>3</sup> to contribute to their degree programme results. Completion rates and grades met internal benchmarks<sup>4</sup> for 2019-23. Detailed achievement monitoring identifies trends at course, cohort and year levels to provide insights into overall performance. High levels of academic achievement are consistent through time.</p> <p>Internal moderation of assessments involves selected academic staff and the academic director from EcoQuest, academic and research associates, and the UNH-EcoQuest academic programme coordinator. Cross-marking and systematic review of assessment results support the validation of achievement, with periodic in-person moderation by the UNH-EcoQuest academic programme coordinator who visits every 12-18 months.</p>
Conclusion:	Students achieve well, gaining credits for their university programmes. They also develop practical skills in

<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.

<sup>2</sup> The sustainable agriculture and food systems programme requires at least 36 credit hours and two courses relevant to the programme.

<sup>3</sup> The summer term programme includes two courses and is worth 8 credit hours; the semester programme is four courses worth 16 credit hours in total.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 1, Table 1.

	fieldwork, research skills and knowledge of New Zealand ecology. Achievement is well understood at student, course and cohort levels.
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## 1.2 What is the value of the outcomes for key stakeholders, including students?

Performance:	<b>Excellent</b>
Self-assessment:	<b>Good</b>
Findings and supporting evidence:	<p>Students described their EcoQuest experience as life-changing, noting that it added value to their degrees. This includes enhanced CVs for employment and evidence of research and writing skills to support graduate programme applications. Strong collaborative relationships developed with EcoQuest staff, research partners and student peers enhance professional networks and future opportunities.</p> <p>UNH staff reported increased independence, self-confidence and resilience in returning students, which prepared them well for ongoing study and employment.</p> <p>EcoQuest collaborates with iwi, local councils, restoration trusts, non-governmental organisations, landowners and land managers. Staff and students contribute to longitudinal research and monitoring that adds to Aotearoa New Zealand’s research knowledge base. EcoQuest’s long-term relationships within the community and with mana whenua support good environmental outcomes in the region.</p> <p>EcoQuest understands the value of the outcomes for graduates and the community. An optional online evaluation at the end of the programme provides feedback on student experiences and contributes to programme review and improvement. EcoQuest maintains an active alumni community. Selected alumni stories are collected and used in EcoQuest and UNH promotional material. However, information about graduate outcomes is not systematically collated and analysed to provide a comprehensive longitudinal view of value.</p> <p>Research project information is retained for future use. Reports and findings are shared with landowners and other</p>

	<p>partners and collaborators. Where appropriate, staff and students present findings at marae for mana whenua.</p> <p>In its new draft strategic plan, EcoQuest has identified a need to communicate the value the PTE offers to graduates and stakeholders. Analysis of information about the significant positive impact of EcoQuest’s programmes for all stakeholders would support this activity.</p>
Conclusion:	EcoQuest provides high value outcomes for students, UNH and collaboration partners. Self-assessment needs some improvement.

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

Performance:	<b>Excellent</b>
Self-assessment:	<b>Good</b>
Findings and supporting evidence:	<p>EcoQuest has designed academic programmes to meet the curricular needs and academic quality expectations of UNH. EcoQuest courses are approved as part of the UNH Department of Natural Resources and the Environment degree programme. Regular communication between EcoQuest and UNH ensures programme changes continue to match the needs of both partners.</p> <p>EcoQuest uses the natural environment to support effective, place-based, team-based experiential learning. Understanding indigenous approaches to land use is foundational, and mana whenua are involved in programme delivery and fieldwork activities. Student feedback consistently rates hands-on field experiences as the most effective learning, and fieldwork is a key activity for the development of students’ skills and knowledge.</p> <p>Feedback from programme evaluation meetings feeds into delivery planning for each new cohort. Weekly debriefs by field leaders collect student feedback to contribute to regular and ongoing review of course components and field trips during delivery. Minor changes are made as needed. Formal student evaluations during and at the end of the programme also inform course and programme review and improvement.</p>

	<p>Student learning is well led by suitably qualified and experienced staff. Students have daily contact with teaching staff and receive regular mentoring and support. Feedback from students noted that some assessment feedback was delayed, although this was not considered to be detrimental to student progress.</p> <p>Assessment methods ensure authentic individual grading with exams, written assessments, presentations and research reports, providing robust evidence of the skills and knowledge gained.</p>
Conclusion:	EcoQuest programmes and activities meet the needs of UNH students and the Study Abroad programme. Local community and mana whenua are key collaborators.

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

Performance:	<b>Excellent</b>
Self-assessment:	<b>Excellent</b>
Findings and supporting evidence:	<p>An extensive admissions process assesses student suitability for the programme to ensure there is a high likelihood of success. Induction activities focus on whanaungatanga, and establish good relationships within the student cohort. Student goals are clarified during induction, and staff discuss potential issues or concerns at the start of the programme. A comprehensive student handbook provides all necessary information.</p> <p>Student wellbeing needs are identified at admission and orientation and are monitored throughout the programme. The most important needs are comprehensively met. The EcoQuest community enables students and staff to form social relationships that support a collegial learning environment. Staff are on site for shared meals and leisure activities which provides a whānau environment, with opportunities for informal contact and casual conversation.</p> <p>Students have a strong voice and are comfortable raising issues with staff. A student representative process provides feedback to staff and management. Student surveys are used to monitor trends and act on issues. A staff member with primary responsibility for student</p>



	<p>pastoral care provides opportunities for students to seek support through weekly scheduled drop-ins. Field trips are another activity where students can talk directly to staff.</p> <p>The Code of Practice<sup>5</sup> review is authentic, reflective and action-oriented. Plans to embed the self-review process into organisational planning will streamline the process and link the self-review to governing board-monitored improvement plans.</p>
Conclusion:	<p>Students are well supported within a residential context. The collaborative culture and environment provide opportunities for students to develop strong social networks with peers and staff.</p>

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

Performance:	<b>Excellent</b>
Self-assessment:	<b>Good</b>
Findings and supporting evidence:	<p>EcoQuest governance and management have a history of strong support for educational performance. The board of trustees has extensive governance experience and is well connected to relevant national, regional and local networks. Four trustees are tangata whenua, of whom three are mana whenua. Trustees meet regularly and communicate effectively with management, staff, students and stakeholders.</p> <p>EcoQuest successfully managed significant operational disruption and financial challenges throughout 2020-22. Staffing levels were reduced, although Curious Minds funding enabled some staff to be retained to work with schools, and field research monitoring was continued by staff in the absence of students. Agreements with UNH were maintained and students returned in 2022.</p> <p>Academic leadership is effective, with academic management processes jointly managed by UNH and</p>

<sup>5</sup> [The Tertiary and International Learners Code of Practice](#)

	<p>EcoQuest, from pre-admission<sup>6</sup> to validation of student results.</p> <p>The relatively new academic team feel valued, although described their roles as demanding and intensive. There is currently limited time allocated for external research or professional development. Some systems and processes are being reintroduced as staffing levels have increased. The EcoQuest leadership acknowledges the impact of workload issues and is recruiting for an additional academic staff member and operations manager.</p>
Conclusion:	EcoQuest's leadership effectively supports educational achievement and ecological activities. Changes in strategic direction and leadership are currently being embedded.

### 1.6 How effectively are important compliance accountabilities managed?

Performance:	<b>Good</b>
Self-assessment:	<b>Good</b>
Findings and supporting evidence:	<p>EcoQuest is effectively managing its compliance accountabilities. A comprehensive quality management system includes detailed policies, operating procedures and associated forms, and informs all staff and student activities. These are reviewed and updated regularly. Planned system improvements are underway to streamline access to forms and internal documentation.</p> <p>Health and safety and risk management is a key focus. Effective processes and checklists ensure risk is managed at all times, including when students are away from the centre. A self-review of health and safety/risk management policy and operating procedures was submitted for an independent external audit. The successful outcome of this audit<sup>7</sup> means EcoQuest has gained concession/permission</p>

<sup>6</sup> The EcoQuest director of admissions is based at UNH in the United States. The associate dean of the College of Life Sciences and Agriculture (COLSA) of UNH oversees the administration of the programme.

<sup>7</sup> EcoQuest gained Outdoor Safety Certification following a safety audit conducted by the Register of Outdoor Safety Auditors on 21 December 2023. The Outdoor Safety Certification is valid until 21 December 2026.

	<p>from the Department of Conservation to operate on public conservation land.</p> <p>Programmes are delivered as approved by NZQA and in accordance with the agreement with UNH. Documentation is provided to NZQA as required.</p> <p>No concerns were identified in an audit of student files. The UNH admissions process ensures appropriate student visas, and insurance cover meets Code requirements.</p>
<p>Conclusion:</p>	<p>EcoQuest has sound processes in place to maintain compliance with relevant legislation, rules and regulations. Health and safety is a key focus and is well managed.</p>

# Focus areas

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

## 2.1 International student support and wellbeing

Performance:	<b>Excellent</b>
Self-assessment:	<b>Excellent</b>

## 2.2 EcoQuest Education Foundation Semester Programme ID: 105467-1

Performance:	<b>Excellent</b>
Self-assessment:	<b>Good</b>

# 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.*

NZQA recommends that EcoQuest Centre for Indigeneity, Ecology and Creativity:

- Explore ways to use existing information to report on the impact and value of EcoQuest programmes and activities.

# 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 1

## Internal benchmarks

EcoQuest aims for:

- A 100% pass rate of students that attend the programmes.
- A grade average of each group of students of no less than 86%
- 85% or more of students to achieve a grade average of no less than 86% in any one of the courses

**Table 1. Pass rates and grades for semester programme**

Semester programme	No. students enrolled	Grade range %	% students 86% or >	Grade range %	% students 86% or >	Grade range %	% Students 86% or >	Grade range %	% students 86% or >	No. students passed	Pass rate %
		NR660 - Ecol		NR661 - Res Ecol		NR662 - Policy		NR663 - DRPP			
2019(1)	26	86-93	100	86-96	100	85-95	96	84-96	92	26	100
2019(3)	21	85-96	91	86-97	100	86-96	100	84-97	95	21	100
2020(1)	26	86-98	100	86-97	100	97-97	100	86-97	100	26	100
2022(3)	18	88-95	100	86-95	100	87-95	100	84-96	94	18	100
2023(1)	24	86-97	100	87-98	100	84-94	96	83-96	88	24	100
2019(1)-23(1)	115	85-98	98	86-97	100	84-97	98	83-98	94	115	100.0

# Appendix 2

## Conduct of external evaluation and review

*All external evaluation and reviews are conducted in accordance with NZQA's published rules. The methodology used is described in the web document <https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/providers-partners/external-evaluation-and-review/>. 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. 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 fraud<sup>8</sup>*
- *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.*

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<sup>8</sup> 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 under the Quality Assurance (including External Evaluation and Review (EER)) Rules 2022, which are made by NZQA under section 452(1)(t) of the Education and Training Act 2020 and approved by the NZQA Board and the Minister of Education.*

*Self-assessment and participation and cooperation in external evaluation and review are requirements for:*

- *maintaining accreditation to provide an approved programme for all TEOs other than universities, and*
- *maintaining consent to assess against standards on the Directory of Assessment Standards for all TEOs excluding universities, and*
- *maintaining micro-credential approval for all TEOs other than universities.*

*The requirements for participation and cooperation are set through the Programme Approval and Accreditation Rules 2022, the Consent to Assess Against Standards on the Directory of Assessment and Skill Standards Rules 2022 and the Micro-credential Approval and Accreditation Rules 2022 respectively.*

*In addition, the Private Training Establishment Registration Rules 2022 require registered private training establishments to undertake self-assessment and participate in external evaluation and review as a condition of maintaining registration.*

*NZQA is responsible for ensuring non-university TEOs continue to comply with the rules after the initial granting of approval and accreditation of programmes, micro-credentials and consents to assess and 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 Quality Assurance (including External Evaluation and Review (EER)) Rules 2022. 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)). All rules cited above are available at <https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/about-us/our-role/legislation/nzqa-rules/>, while information about the conduct and methodology for external evaluation and review can be found at <https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/providers-partners/external-evaluation-and-review/>.*

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