



From classroom knowledge to community-based practice: a mixed-methods inquiry into tourism experience management competencies in northern mountainous Vietnam

Hoang Thi Phuong Nga¹

¹ Faculty of Tourism, School of Sciences, Thai Nguyen University, Thai Nguyen, Vietnam.

Article Info

Article History:

Published: 26 Sept 2026

Publication Issue:

Volume 3, Issue 9
September-2026

Page Number:

458-470

Corresponding Author:

Hoang Thi Phuong Nga

Abstract:

Community-based tourism requires professionals to translate contextual knowledge into competencies that can be enacted under complex destination conditions. This study examines tourism experience management competencies among undergraduate students in Northern Mountainous Vietnam using a mixed-methods design combining assessments from 270 final-year students with semi-structured interviews involving students, lecturers, destination managers, and tourism authorities. Five competency domains were examined. Results reveal an uneven profile: local cultural and social knowledge was comparatively strongest, whereas digital technology application and multi-stakeholder coordination were weaker. Qualitative findings indicate that students possessed stronger conceptual and procedural foundations than capabilities requiring adaptation, technological operation, and cross-organizational interaction. The study identifies this pattern as a knowledge-enactment gap and shows that its extent varies across competency domains. The findings suggest that effective competency development requires alignment between specific competencies and the experiential conditions through which they are enacted, highlighting the importance of competency-specific experiential learning and university-destination collaboration.

Keywords: community-based tourism; tourism education; professional competence; experiential learning; knowledge-enactment gap

1. Introduction

Community-based tourism (CBT) has increasingly been positioned as a pathway toward sustainable local development, particularly in regions where tourism depends on distinctive cultural, social, and environmental resources (UNWTO, 2022). In Northern Mountainous Vietnam, ethnic diversity, traditional cultural practices, and distinctive landscapes provide substantial potential for CBT development (Nguyen & Tran, 2023). Yet the presence of these resources alone does not ensure meaningful or sustainable visitor experiences. Their translation into experiences that are culturally grounded, operationally viable, and responsive to changing visitor expectations depends substantially on the professional competencies of those responsible for designing, coordinating, and managing them.

This challenge has become increasingly important as tourism shifts toward more personalized, participatory, and digitally mediated experiences. In community-based settings, visitor experiences emerge through interactions among tourists, host communities, service providers, cultural resources, and the wider destination environment rather than through the consumption of a single tourism product or service (Pine & Gilmore, 2019). Tourism professionals therefore require more than conventional service knowledge. They must be able to interpret local cultural and social contexts, translate local resources into coherent experiences, manage service operations, use digital technologies, and coordinate actors with different interests and responsibilities. Importantly, these competencies are not equally amenable to classroom-based development. Whereas contextual knowledge can be developed substantially through formal instruction, competencies involving adaptive service management, technology-enabled operations, and multi-stakeholder coordination depend more strongly on opportunities to apply and refine knowledge in authentic or realistically simulated professional settings.

This distinction poses an important challenge for undergraduate tourism education. Although university programmes can provide students with disciplinary and contextual knowledge, professional competence requires the ability to mobilize that knowledge under the social, institutional, and operational conditions in which tourism actually occurs. This issue is particularly relevant to CBT, where professional practice is embedded in local communities and shaped by relationships among residents, tourism businesses, destination managers, public authorities, and other actors. In Northern Mountainous Vietnam, however, the systematic development of tourism experience management competencies within these specific conditions has received relatively limited attention in undergraduate tourism education (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2020).

A corresponding research gap remains. Existing scholarship has provided useful frameworks for understanding tourism competencies and experience management, yet less is known about how the competencies required for CBT experience management are developed during undergraduate professional preparation, particularly in culturally distinctive and multi-stakeholder destination contexts. Identifying what tourism students should know or be able to do does not, by itself, explain how classroom-based knowledge becomes situated professional competence. Empirical evidence integrating the perspectives of those involved in both tourism education and destination practice—including students, lecturers, destination managers, and public tourism authorities—also remains limited. Without such evidence, competency development risks being approached primarily through generic educational frameworks that may insufficiently capture the operational realities of community-based destinations.

Against this background, the present study examines the development of tourism experience management competencies within undergraduate tourism education in Northern Mountainous Vietnam. It addresses three interrelated objectives: to identify the competency domains relevant to managing community-based tourism experiences at the undergraduate level; to assess the extent to which these competencies have been developed among tourism students in the region; to examine the educational and practice-related conditions that facilitate or constrain the translation of classroom-based knowledge into professional competence. On this basis, the study considers implications for curriculum development and university–destination collaboration in CBT education.

The study contributes to tourism education and CBT research in three respects. First, it conceptualizes tourism experience management competence through five interrelated domains: local cultural and social knowledge, experience product design, service operations management, digital technology application, and multi-stakeholder coordination. Second, by bringing experiential learning and professional competency perspectives together, it directs attention beyond the possession of knowledge toward its application in situated professional contexts. Third, by integrating student assessments with perspectives from lecturers, destination managers, and public tourism authorities, the study examines competency development within the broader relationship between university education and destination practice. In doing so, it provides context-specific evidence on the preparation of future tourism professionals for community-based experience management in a region where tourism development is closely intertwined with local culture, communities, and sustainable development.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Tourism experience management in community-based tourism

Tourism research has progressively shifted from product- and service-centered perspectives toward an understanding of value as emerging through holistic and context-dependent experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1999, 2019; Schmitt, 2003). From this perspective, tourism experiences are not simply delivered as predefined products but are shaped through interactions among visitors, places, service providers, and host communities. The co-creation perspective reinforces this shift by positioning visitors and destination actors as participants in experience formation rather than as separate producers and consumers (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009).

This logic becomes particularly important in community-based tourism (CBT), where visitor experiences are embedded in local cultural, social, environmental, and livelihood systems. Unlike standardized tourism settings, the resources through which CBT experiences are created are simultaneously part of community life and identity. Effective experience management must therefore reconcile visitor expectations with local meanings, community capacities, and relationships among multiple destination actors (Richards & Hall, 2000; UNWTO, 2022). Experience management in CBT consequently extends beyond product design or service delivery to the integration of contextual understanding, operational capability, stakeholder relationships, and increasingly technology-mediated interactions.

This shift creates a corresponding competency challenge. If CBT experiences are produced through interconnected cultural, operational, technological, and relational processes, professional readiness cannot be adequately represented by isolated knowledge or technical skills. What matters is whether these capabilities can be integrated and mobilized under destination-specific conditions (Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

The educational implication is therefore significant. Understanding tourism experiences does not necessarily imply an ability to manage them. University programmes may provide knowledge of culture, tourism products, service procedures, stakeholders, and digital technologies without ensuring that students can integrate and apply this knowledge in complex community-based settings. The critical issue consequently shifts from what students know about tourism to whether and how that knowledge becomes professionally actionable competence.

2.2. From knowledge acquisition to professional competence

A competency-based perspective distinguishes between possessing disciplinary knowledge and being able to mobilize knowledge, skills, and other capabilities effectively in professional situations (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). For tourism education, this distinction challenges the assumption that exposure to curriculum content can be treated as equivalent to professional readiness. Contemporary tourism work increasingly requires combinations of technical and transversal competencies, including collaboration, adaptability, problem solving, technology use, stakeholder engagement, and decision-making (Hsu et al., 2022; Mekinc et al., 2023). Within CBT specifically, this challenge is intensified by the social and community dimensions of tourism practice, which are not always adequately represented in conventional tourism curricula (Jugmohan et al., 2022).

The problem is therefore not resolved simply by adding more competency-related content. Knowing stakeholder-management principles is different from negotiating competing interests; understanding service procedures is different from responding to unexpected operational situations; and learning about digital technologies is different from using digital systems or visitor data to support decisions. The relevant distinction is between competency content and competency enactment.

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) provides a mechanism for explaining this transition. Professional learning develops through iterative interaction among concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation rather than through knowledge acquisition alone (Kolb, 1984). Applied to tourism education, this suggests that competencies requiring judgment, adaptation, interaction, and problem solving are unlikely to develop fully through classroom instruction alone. Fieldwork, internships, destination-based projects, simulations, and collaborative learning environments become important because they create situations in which conceptual knowledge must be tested, interpreted, and reconstructed through action.

Evidence from tourism education supports the value of such learning environments. Engagement in real CBT projects can connect academic learning with community practice and expose students to the complexities of destination implementation (Dolezal & Novelli, 2021). Service-learning and other collaborative approaches can similarly strengthen competencies associated with stakeholder engagement, systems thinking, and integrated problem solving, while active and simulation-based learning provides opportunities to develop capabilities that are difficult to reproduce through conventional classroom instruction (Almeida et al., 2021; Atef et al., 2023). More recent Living Lab approaches further illustrate how real-world collaborative environments can support professional development, networking, adaptability, and learning agility among tourism students (Choe & Kim, 2024).

Taken together, this literature suggests that the principal challenge is not a simple opposition between theory and practice. Rather, it concerns the conditions under which theoretical and contextual knowledge becomes actionable professional competence. Competency theory specifies the capabilities required for professional performance, whereas experiential learning helps explain how those capabilities may develop through application. Their intersection is particularly relevant to CBT experience management, where professional practice simultaneously requires cultural interpretation, experience design, operational judgment, technological application, and coordination across organizational boundaries.

2.3. An integrated competency structure for CBT experience management

The literature suggests that managing tourism experiences in community-based settings requires competencies extending beyond conventional service delivery. Because CBT experiences are embedded in local cultural systems and co-created through interactions among visitors, communities, service providers, and destination actors,

professional competence must combine contextual understanding with the capacity to design, deliver, coordinate, and adapt experiences (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009; Richards & Hall, 2000; UNWTO, 2022).

Drawing on experience-management, professional competency, and tourism-education literature, this study organizes these requirements into five interrelated domains: local cultural and social knowledge, experience product design, service operations management, digital technology application, and multi-stakeholder coordination (Pine & Gilmore, 2019; Spencer & Spencer, 1993; Hsu et al., 2022; Mekinc et al., 2023). Local cultural and social knowledge provides the contextual basis for interpreting community resources; experience product design translates these resources into meaningful visitor experiences; service operations management enables their delivery under variable conditions; digital technology supports increasingly technology-mediated tourism processes; and multi-stakeholder coordination connects the actors involved in producing and governing CBT experiences (Richards & Hall, 2000; UNWTO, 2022).

These domains are analytically distinct but professionally interdependent. Cultural understanding has limited operational value if it cannot inform experience design and delivery, while well-designed experiences may remain difficult to implement without effective stakeholder coordination and appropriate technological support. CBT experience management competence should therefore be understood not as an accumulation of isolated skills, but as the capacity to integrate and mobilize complementary capabilities in context (Kolb, 1984; Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

Importantly, the five domains may not depend on classroom learning to the same extent. Contextual knowledge can be substantially supported through formal instruction, whereas adaptive operations, digital application, and stakeholder coordination require greater exposure to experiential, collaborative, and practice-based learning environments (Dolezal & Novelli, 2021; Atef et al., 2023; Choe & Kim, 2024). Competency development may therefore be uneven even within the same curriculum. This provides the basis for examining not only which competencies are stronger or weaker, but why different competency domains may develop differently during undergraduate education.

2.4. Research Framework

Based on the preceding synthesis, the study proposes the research framework presented in Figure 1

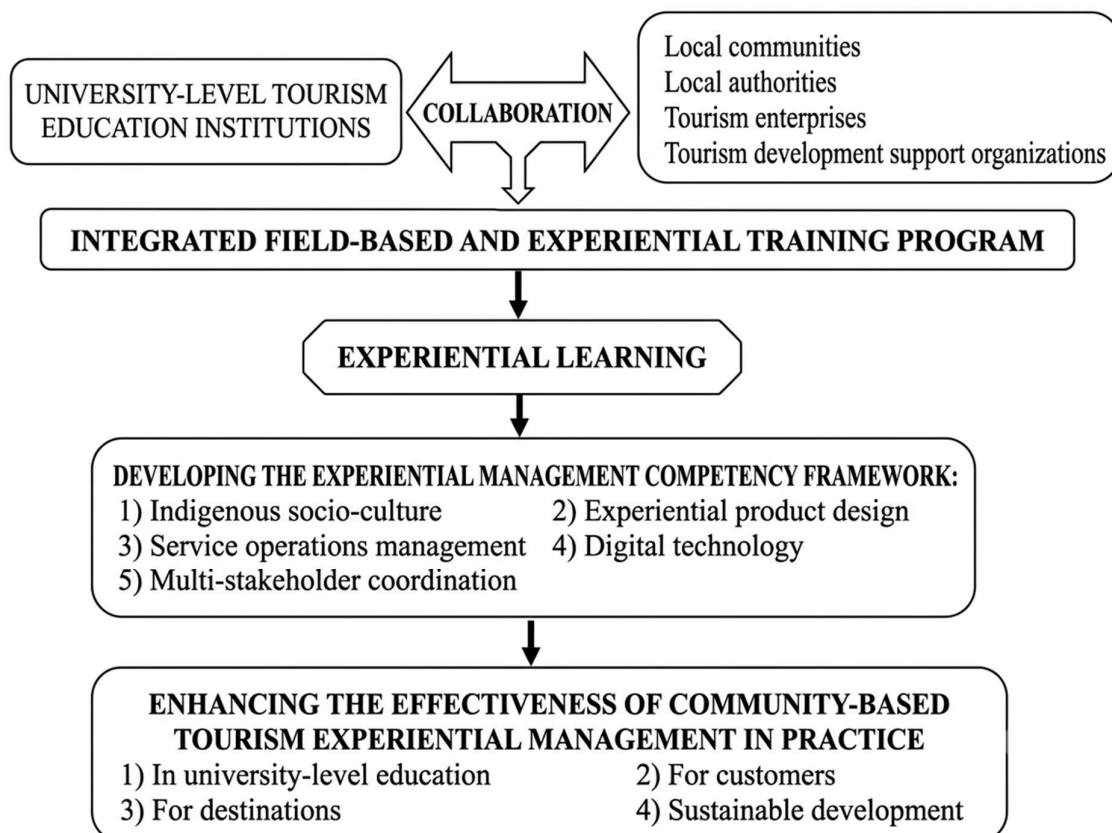


Figure 1. Research framework for tourism experience management competency development

Source: Author, 2026

The framework uses the five competency domains as the analytical structure for assessing students' preparation for CBT experience management, while experiential learning provides the lens for interpreting the educational and practice-related conditions associated with their development (Kolb, 1984; Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Accordingly, the quantitative component assesses the relative development of the five competency domains, while the qualitative component examines the educational and practice-related conditions underlying the observed patterns. The framework therefore serves as an analytical bridge between competency assessment and the explanation of competency development, rather than as a causal model.

3. Empirical Findings and Discussion

3.1. Quantitative Findings

The quantitative analysis covered 270 final-year tourism students from Thai Nguyen University and Tay Bac University. Across the five competency domains, mean scores ranged from 3.38 to 3.87 on a five-point scale, revealing a clear but uneven competency profile (Table 1).

Table 1. Development of tourism experience management competencies in community-based tourism

Competency domain	Mean	SD
Local cultural and social knowledge	3.87	0.65
Experience product design	3.78	0.69
Service operations management	3.71	0.71
Digital technology application	3.52	0.74
Multi-stakeholder coordination	3.38	0.80

Source: Author, 2026

Local cultural and social knowledge recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.65$), followed by experience product design ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.69$) and service operations management ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.71$). By contrast, digital technology application ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.74$) and multi-stakeholder coordination ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.80$) occupied the lower end of the competency profile. The results therefore reveal a systematic gradient: competencies more closely associated with contextual knowledge and established tourism functions were rated more highly than those involving technology-mediated practice and coordination across organizational boundaries.

The dispersion of responses reinforces this pattern. Local cultural and social knowledge combined the highest mean with the lowest standard deviation, indicating both a relatively strong and comparatively consistent self-assessment among students. Multi-stakeholder coordination showed the opposite pattern, with the lowest mean and highest standard deviation. Digital technology application also displayed a comparatively lower mean and greater dispersion. These results suggest that weaknesses in the latter domains are accompanied by greater heterogeneity in students' perceived competency development.

The two intermediate domains—experience product design and service operations management—show a less pronounced pattern. Their mean scores indicate that students perceived themselves as having developed a reasonable foundation in designing tourism experiences and managing service processes, but these competencies remained below local cultural and social knowledge. Taken together, the five domains do not indicate a uniform competency deficit; rather, they point to uneven development across different dimensions of tourism experience management.

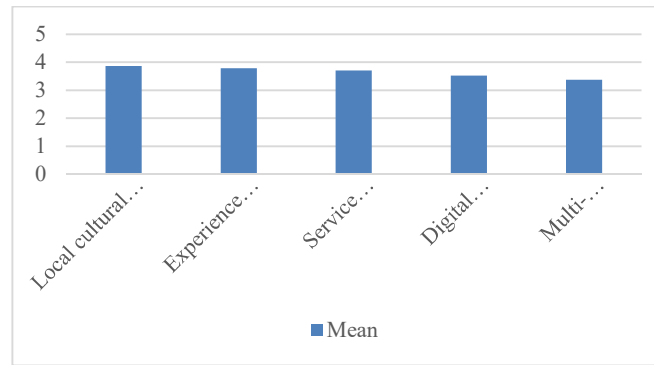


Figure 2. Development of tourism experience management competencies

Source: Author, 2026

Figure 2 visualizes this uneven profile. Rather than suggesting a general weakness across all domains, the distribution distinguishes a comparatively stronger contextual and product-related foundation from weaker technology- and coordination-related competencies. This distinction is particularly relevant to the research framework because the latter competencies involve greater dependence on applied, interactive, and organizationally embedded forms of professional practice.

To determine whether the competency pattern differed between the two participating institutions, independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted for each domain. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of competency domains between Thai Nguyen University and Tay Bac University

Competency domain	Thai Nguyen University (n = 190), M (SD)	Tay Bac University (n = 80), M (SD)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Local cultural and social knowledge	3.89 (0.64)	3.82 (0.67)	0.812	.418
Experience product design	3.80 (0.68)	3.73 (0.71)	0.758	.449
Service management operations	3.73 (0.70)	3.66 (0.73)	0.731	.465
Digital application technology	3.54 (0.73)	3.47 (0.76)	0.709	.479
Multi-stakeholder coordination	3.40 (0.79)	3.33 (0.82)	0.652	.515

Note. No between-institution difference was statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Source: Author, 2026

No statistically significant differences were found between students at Thai Nguyen University and Tay Bac University across any of the five competency domains ($p > .05$). The largest observed difference remained small: local cultural and social knowledge averaged 3.89 at Thai Nguyen University and 3.82 at Tay Bac University, while the corresponding differences in the other four domains were similarly limited.

These results should not be interpreted as evidence that the two programmes are equivalent. A non-significant test indicates only that the observed between-institution differences were insufficient to reach statistical significance within the present sample and design. More relevant to the present analysis is the consistency of the competency profile across the two institutions: local cultural and social knowledge was the strongest domain in both samples, whereas digital technology application and multi-stakeholder coordination remained comparatively weaker.

Overall, the quantitative findings reveal an uneven rather than uniformly weak pattern of competency development. Students reported comparatively stronger competence in local cultural and social knowledge, moderate levels in experience product design and service operations management, and lower levels in digital technology application and multi-stakeholder coordination. The quantitative evidence establishes this pattern but cannot, by itself, explain the educational processes or learning conditions underlying it. The qualitative analysis therefore examines how students, lecturers, destination managers, and public tourism authorities interpret these differences and the conditions associated with their development.

3.2. Qualitative Findings

The qualitative strand drew on semi-structured interviews with 28 participants representing four stakeholder groups: university lecturers, final-year tourism students, CBT destination managers, and government tourism authorities. Thematic analysis focused on recurring patterns in how participants perceived the development and practical enactment of tourism experience management competencies. Cross-stakeholder comparison generated four interconnected themes: strong knowledge foundations but limited situated application; procedural familiarity without equivalent adaptive capability; limited exposure to authentic practice as a cross-cutting constraint; particularly pronounced practice gaps in digital application and multi-stakeholder coordination. These themes move beyond the identification of stronger and weaker competency domains to explain how the knowledge–practice relationship was experienced across educational and professional contexts.

Strong knowledge foundations do not necessarily translate into situated competence: A recurring theme across stakeholder accounts was the distinction between possessing relevant knowledge and being able to mobilize it in context. This was particularly evident in local cultural and social knowledge. Participants generally regarded students as relatively well prepared in regional culture, ethnic heritage, and local customs, reflecting the emphasis placed on these areas within the curriculum. A senior lecturer described this curricular strength: *“Our curriculum heavily emphasizes regional culture and ethnic heritage. Students spend considerable time learning about local customs, which gives them strong confidence in cultural content.”* (L02, University Lecturer).

This perception is consistent with the quantitative finding that local cultural and social knowledge was the strongest competency domain. Yet the interviews also qualified this apparent strength. Participants indicated that students had fewer opportunities to apply cultural knowledge through sustained interaction with communities and visitors. Consequently, confidence in cultural content did not necessarily translate into an equivalent capacity to interpret local meanings, negotiate cultural differences, or adapt communication in actual tourism settings. The qualitative distinction is therefore not between “having” and “lacking” cultural competence. Rather, it lies between cultural knowledge as curricular attainment and cultural competence as situated professional practice. The former appeared comparatively well established, whereas the latter remained more dependent on opportunities for direct application.

Procedural familiarity exceeds adaptive professional capability: A second theme concerned the difference between knowing established tourism procedures and responding effectively when professional situations deviate from them. This pattern was evident across both experience product design and service operations. Participants described students as familiar with tour structures and basic experience-product development processes, but less confident when design required personalization, creative adjustment, or interpretation of actual visitor behaviour. Limited access to real visitor information and opportunities for creative experimentation appeared to constrain the transition from standardized product development to more responsive experience design.

A similar pattern emerged in service operations. Students were perceived as understanding basic procedures but having greater difficulty when confronted with itinerary changes, visitor–community conflicts, or other situations requiring immediate professional judgment. A destination manager might express this tension as follows: *“When everything follows the planned itinerary, most students can handle the basic tasks quite well. The difficulty begins when something changes—a guest makes an unexpected request, the schedule has to be adjusted, or a problem arises with the local community. They know the procedure, but they are often unsure how to make a decision in the actual situation.”* (Illustrative: Destination Manager)

The important finding is therefore not simply that students need “more practice”. Rather, stakeholder accounts distinguish procedural familiarity from adaptive professional capability. Students appeared better prepared for situations with predetermined procedures than for circumstances requiring interpretation, adjustment, and judgment.

Limited exposure to authentic practice is a cross-cutting constraint: The interviews further suggested that these limitations were not isolated within particular competency domains. Across stakeholder accounts, restricted exposure to authentic or realistically structured professional environments emerged as a recurring condition affecting the translation of knowledge into practice.

The manifestations differed across competencies. Cultural understanding required direct engagement with communities; experience design benefited from access to visitor information and opportunities for experimentation; service operations required exposure to non-routine situations; digital competence required interaction with operational systems and data; and stakeholder coordination required direct engagement with actors outside the university. The common issue was therefore not simply whether relevant content existed in the curriculum, but whether students had sufficient opportunities to use, test, adapt, and integrate that knowledge under conditions resembling professional practice.

Importantly, this interpretation shifts attention away from framing the findings solely as individual student deficiencies. The recurring pattern instead points to the learning environment and opportunities for competency enactment. Where learning remained predominantly curriculum-based, students could acquire conceptual and procedural foundations; where competence depended on interaction, uncertainty, operational systems, or external stakeholders, development appeared less consistent.

Digital application and multi-stakeholder coordination expose the deepest practice gap: The knowledge–practice distinction became most pronounced in digital technology application and multi-stakeholder coordination—the two domains located at the lower end of the quantitative competency profile. For digital technology, participants indicated that students had been introduced to CRM, big data, and digital marketing, but had relatively limited opportunities to operate tourism service-management software or analyze visitor-behaviour data. The gap was therefore not primarily one of awareness. Students knew *about* relevant technologies but had fewer opportunities to use them as operational tools for experience management.

The stakeholder-coordination problem appeared even more fundamental. Participants reported difficulties in identifying relevant actors, negotiating interests, and coordinating relationships among the communities, businesses, and institutions involved in CBT. At the same time, relatively few training activities required students to undertake this form of coordination in practice. A destination-level stakeholder might characterize the problem more sharply: “Students can list the stakeholders very clearly in an assignment—local people, businesses, authorities and tourists. But when they have to bring those people together, the situation is completely different. Each side wants something different. Students are not yet confident in negotiating who does what, whose interests should be prioritized, or how to deal with disagreement.” (Illustrative: CBT Destination Manager). This distinction between identifying stakeholders and coordinating stakeholders is analytically important. The former can be demonstrated through conceptual understanding; the latter requires communication, negotiation, responsibility-sharing, and decision-making under competing interests.

Digital application and stakeholder coordination therefore expose a common problem from two different directions. Digital competence requires students to operate technologies and work with data, while stakeholder coordination requires them to operate across organizational and institutional boundaries. Both depend heavily on learning environments that extend beyond conventional classroom instruction.

Cross-stakeholder and cross-theme synthesis: Comparison across the themes reveals that the qualitative findings cannot be reduced to five separate competency deficits. A broader pattern connects them: students appeared to possess a comparatively stronger foundation in codified, curriculum-based knowledge than in capabilities requiring situated application, adaptation, technological operation, and interaction across organizational boundaries.

This pattern also provides an explanatory layer for the quantitative results. The comparatively high assessment of local cultural and social knowledge corresponds with interview accounts of substantial curricular exposure to regional culture and heritage. Conversely, the lower assessments of digital technology application and multi-stakeholder coordination correspond with accounts of limited hands-on technological practice and limited opportunities for direct stakeholder coordination. Thus, the qualitative and quantitative strands converge on the same broad competency pattern, while the interviews clarify the conditions under which that pattern appears to emerge.

At the same time, the qualitative evidence adds an important qualification. The distinction is not simply between competencies that students possess and those they lack. Even the comparatively stronger domains revealed limitations

when knowledge had to be enacted under authentic conditions. Product design became more problematic when personalization was required; service operations became more difficult under unexpected circumstances; and cultural knowledge became less secure when students had to interpret and apply it through direct community interaction.

The central qualitative finding can therefore be characterized as a knowledge–enactment gap: relevant knowledge and procedural foundations are present, but their conversion into situated professional capability remains uneven. This gap is most visible in digital application and multi-stakeholder coordination, but it cuts across the competency structure more broadly. The finding provides the empirical basis for examining, in the following discussion, how experiential learning conditions and the organization of tourism education may shape the transition from classroom-based knowledge to professional competence.

3.3. Discussion

The integrated findings reveal that the central issue in students' tourism experience management competencies is not a uniform lack of knowledge, but an uneven capacity to enact knowledge under situated professional conditions. Quantitatively, students reported stronger competence in local cultural and social knowledge, followed by experience product design and service operations management, whereas digital technology application and multi-stakeholder coordination were comparatively weaker. Qualitatively, the same pattern was reflected in stakeholder accounts distinguishing students' familiarity with relevant concepts and procedures from their ability to apply them when tasks involved uncertainty, technology use, real visitor information, or interaction across organizational boundaries.

From knowledge acquisition to knowledge enactment: The contrast between local cultural and social knowledge and the more practice-dependent competencies provides the clearest evidence of this pattern. Students' comparatively strong cultural knowledge appears consistent with substantial curricular exposure to ethnic cultures, regional heritage, and local customs. Yet the qualitative findings showed that this knowledge became less secure when students were required to interpret and apply it through direct engagement with communities and visitors. Thus, even the strongest competency domain revealed a distinction between knowing about a professional context and acting competently within it.

The same distinction became progressively more visible in experience product design and service operations. Students were familiar with established product-development processes and standardized service procedures, but greater difficulties emerged when tasks required personalization, creative adjustment, or responses to unexpected situations. The findings therefore do not indicate a simple divide between competencies that students possess and those they lack. Instead, they reveal a continuum in which competency becomes less consistently developed as professional performance requires greater contextual adaptation and judgment.

This pattern is consistent with the competency perspective adopted in the theoretical framework, which treats professional competence as the capacity to mobilize knowledge and capabilities in relation to professional tasks rather than as knowledge possession alone (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). The present findings empirically specify this distinction within CBT education by identifying a knowledge–enactment gap: students may possess relevant conceptual and procedural foundations without being equally prepared to mobilize them under authentic destination conditions.

This interpretation also helps avoid reducing the findings to a generic “theory–practice gap.” The issue is more specific. The empirical evidence does not suggest that theoretical preparation is irrelevant or uniformly inadequate. On the contrary, comparatively strong cultural knowledge demonstrates the value of formal education. The limitation emerges when curriculum-based knowledge must be combined with situational judgment, interaction, technology, or adaptation. The challenge is therefore not simply to increase what students know, but to strengthen the conditions under which knowledge becomes professionally actionable.

Different competencies require different forms of experiential exposure: Viewed through Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984), the findings further suggest that the presence of practical learning alone may be insufficient to explain competency development. What appears to matter is whether the form of experiential exposure corresponds to the demands of the competency being developed. The qualitative evidence illustrates this distinction across the competency structure. Applying cultural knowledge requires direct interaction with communities and culturally situated situations; personalized experience design benefits from engagement with visitor information and opportunities for creative experimentation; adaptive service operations require exposure to non-routine and unpredictable circumstances; digital competence requires hands-on engagement with operational technologies and

data; and stakeholder coordination requires interaction with actors holding different interests and responsibilities. The practical conditions required to develop these competencies are therefore not interchangeable.

This point qualifies a straightforward application of experiential learning to tourism education. Field exposure, internships, simulations, and practice-based projects may all provide experiential opportunities, but they do not necessarily develop the same capabilities. A field visit may deepen contextual understanding without requiring stakeholder negotiation. A standardized service simulation may strengthen procedural performance without exposing students to genuinely competing interests. Likewise, classroom instruction in CRM or digital marketing may develop technological awareness without requiring students to operate systems or interpret real visitor data.

The empirical pattern therefore suggests that not all experiential learning is functionally equivalent. What matters is the alignment between the competency sought and the learning situation through which it is enacted. This interpretation is consistent with tourism-education research emphasizing authentic, collaborative, and practice-oriented learning environments as mechanisms for connecting academic learning with professional practice (Dolezal & Novelli, 2021; Almeida et al., 2021; Atef et al., 2023; Choe & Kim, 2024).

This competency-specific interpretation also helps explain why digital technology application and multi-stakeholder coordination remained comparatively weaker despite being represented conceptually within students' education. In both cases, development depends on forms of exposure that are comparatively difficult to reproduce through conventional classroom instruction: access to operational systems and data in the former, and engagement with real actors and potentially competing interests in the latter. The problem is therefore not necessarily the absence of relevant curriculum content, but a weaker correspondence between what is taught and the conditions under which that knowledge must ultimately be enacted.

Competency development extends beyond the curriculum: The findings on digital application and multi-stakeholder coordination have a broader implication for how professional preparation in CBT is conceptualized. Although these domains differ substantively, both depend on resources and relationships extending beyond the individual learner and, in many cases, beyond the university itself.

Digital competence requires more than knowledge of technologies. It requires opportunities to work with operational software, digital service processes, and visitor data. Similarly, stakeholder coordination requires more than the ability to identify relevant actors. It depends on opportunities to communicate, negotiate, distribute responsibilities, and respond to different interests across communities, businesses, destination organizations, and public authorities. The original findings show precisely these limitations: students had been introduced to digital concepts but had limited operational exposure, while stakeholder coordination was constrained by few opportunities for practical negotiation and coordination.

These findings refine the research framework proposed in Section 2. External actors should not be understood merely as contextual stakeholders surrounding university education. For competencies that depend on cross-organizational interaction or access to professional systems, these actors and resources may constitute part of the learning infrastructure through which competence becomes enactable. University–destination relationships therefore matter not only because they provide places for students to practise what has already been learned, but because certain forms of professional capability are difficult to develop without those relationships in the first place.

This interpretation is particularly relevant to CBT. Experience management in community-based destinations occurs through relationships among visitors, host communities, tourism enterprises, destination organizations, and public authorities rather than within a single organizational setting. Preparing students for such work consequently requires attention not only to curriculum content but also to the interfaces through which students encounter the actors, technologies, information, and operational conditions of destination practice.

The absence of statistically significant differences between Thai Nguyen University and Tay Bac University provides additional context for this interpretation. The result should not be taken to demonstrate that the two programmes are equivalent. However, both student groups displayed the same broad competency profile: comparatively stronger cultural and contextual competence and weaker digital and stakeholder-related competence. Within the boundaries of the present sample, this consistency suggests that the observed knowledge–enactment gap may extend beyond an isolated feature of one programme and warrants attention as a broader issue in tourism professional preparation within the regional context.

Overall, the study contributes to the understanding of CBT competency development in two related ways. First, it specifies the commonly invoked distinction between knowledge and practice as a knowledge–enactment gap, showing that competency limitations become more visible when professional tasks require adaptation, technological operation, or coordination across organizational boundaries. Second, it demonstrates that this gap is competency-dependent rather than uniform: different competencies require different forms of experiential exposure, and some depend substantially on learning conditions that extend beyond conventional classroom environments.

The findings therefore refine, rather than simply confirm, the theoretical framework. Professional competency theory helps distinguish knowledge possession from professional enactment (Spencer & Spencer, 1993), while experiential learning provides a basis for understanding why opportunities for application matter (Kolb, 1984). The empirical contribution of this study lies in showing that the transition between the two is shaped by the situated demands of individual competency domains. In CBT education, the central challenge is consequently not only what competencies are included in the curriculum, but whether students encounter the conditions necessary to enact and integrate them in practice

4. Conclusion

This study examined the development of tourism experience management competencies among undergraduate tourism students in Northern Mountainous Vietnam, with particular attention to how classroom-based knowledge is translated into professional competence for community-based tourism. By integrating quantitative assessments from 270 final-year students with qualitative perspectives from lecturers, students, CBT destination managers, and public tourism authorities, the study provides a multi-stakeholder account of competency development at the interface between university education and destination practice.

The findings reveal an uneven rather than uniformly weak competency profile. Local cultural and social knowledge was comparatively well developed, while experience product design and service operations occupied an intermediate position. Digital technology application and multi-stakeholder coordination were comparatively weaker. The absence of statistically significant differences between the two participating universities further indicates that, within the present sample, this broad pattern was shared across the two institutional contexts rather than being confined to one university.

More importantly, the qualitative findings show that these differences cannot be understood solely in terms of stronger or weaker curriculum content. Across the competency domains, students appeared to possess a stronger foundation in codified and procedural knowledge than in capabilities requiring situated application, adaptation, technological operation, and interaction across organizational boundaries. Even comparatively strong cultural knowledge became less secure when students were required to mobilize it through direct engagement with communities and visitors. The gap became more pronounced in digital application and stakeholder coordination, where competence depended more directly on access to operational technologies, real data, external actors, and situations involving different interests and responsibilities.

The central conclusion is therefore that the challenge facing tourism education in this context is not simply a lack of professional knowledge, but an uneven transition from **knowledge** acquisition to knowledge enactment. This study conceptualizes this pattern as a knowledge–enactment gap. Importantly, the gap is not uniform across competencies. Different competencies require different conditions for enactment: cultural knowledge requires situated community engagement; adaptive service management requires exposure to non-routine situations; digital competence requires interaction with operational technologies and data; and stakeholder coordination requires engagement with actors whose interests and responsibilities may differ.

This interpretation contributes to tourism education research by connecting professional competency and experiential learning perspectives at the level of competency development. Rather than treating experiential learning as a generic solution to the theory–practice divide, the findings suggest that its value depends on the alignment between the competency being developed and the conditions under which students are required to enact it. The study therefore extends the analytical focus from whether students receive practical experience to what forms of experience are necessary for different competencies to become professionally actionable.

The findings also refine the role of university–destination relationships in CBT education. For competencies that depend on real stakeholders, operational technologies, visitor information, and context-specific decision-making, destination actors are not merely external partners or sites for applying knowledge acquired at university. They may constitute part of the learning infrastructure through which professional competence is developed. This is particularly relevant to CBT, where experience management is inherently embedded in relationships among communities, tourism enterprises, destination organizations, public authorities, and visitors.

From an educational perspective, the findings suggest that strengthening professional preparation does not necessarily require adding more competency-related content to already crowded curricula. Greater attention should instead be given to the alignment among competency objectives, learning activities, and practice environments. Community-based projects can support the situated application of cultural knowledge; non-routine scenarios and simulations can strengthen adaptive service judgment; access to tourism technologies and visitor data can support digital enactment; and collaborative destination projects can expose students to stakeholder negotiation and coordination. The objective is therefore not simply “more practice,” but forms of practice that correspond to the professional demands of the competency being developed.

These conclusions should nevertheless be interpreted within the boundaries of the study. The quantitative component was based on a convenience sample of final-year students from two universities and relied on self-reported competency assessments rather than direct measures of professional performance. The qualitative component provided perspectives from four stakeholder groups, but these accounts cannot substitute for longitudinal observation of competency development in workplace settings. The cross-sectional and region-specific design also limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other tourism programmes or destination contexts.

Future research could therefore test the proposed competency structure across a broader range of universities and tourism regions, incorporate objective or performance-based competency measures, and follow students longitudinally from university into internships and early employment. Comparative research could also examine whether different forms of experiential learning produce different developmental outcomes across competency domains. Such work would help determine more precisely how particular educational environments support the transition from curriculum-based knowledge to professional enactment.

Overall, this study shows that preparing students for CBT experience management requires attention not only to what they know, but to the conditions under which they learn to use what they know. In Northern Mountainous Vietnam, the central educational challenge is therefore to create stronger connections between classroom learning and the cultural, operational, technological, and relational conditions of destination practice. Addressing this knowledge–enactment gap offers a more targeted basis for preparing tourism graduates to participate effectively in the management of community-based tourism experiences.

Funding Details

This research received no external funding.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare no financial or personal interests that could have influenced the research reported in this paper.

References

- [1] Almeida, F., Buzády, Z., & Ferro, A. (2021). Exploring the role of a serious game in developing competencies in higher tourism education. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*, 29, 100347. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2021.100347>
- [2] Binkhorst, E., & Den Dekker, T. (2009). Agenda for co-creation tourism experience research. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, 18(2–3), 311–327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19368620802594193>
- [3] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

- [4] Choe, Y., & Kim, N. (2024). From the classroom to the Living Lab for developing competencies in tourism higher education. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*, 35, 100511. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2024.100511>
- [5] Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- [6] Jugmohan, S., Giampiccoli, A., & Mtapuri, O. (2022). Towards a community-based tourism curriculum for higher education. *Journal of Educational Studies*, 21(1), 126–146.
- [7] Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall.
- [8] Mekinc, J., Gorenak, M., Ladkin, A., & Turnšek, M. (2023). Educational and training imperatives for future tourism competencies: The case of Slovenia. *Human Systems Management*, 42(5), 499–514. <https://doi.org/10.3233/HSM-220056>
- [9] Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. (2020). *Project on community-based tourism development for the 2021–2025 period, with a vision to 2030* [In Vietnamese]. Ministry of [10] Culture, Sports and Tourism.
- [11] Nguyen, H. T., & Tran, V. Q. (2023). Community-based tourism human resource training in the context of digital transformation in the Northern Mountainous region of Vietnam [In Vietnamese]. *Thai Nguyen University Journal of Science and Technology*, 241(12), 45–53.
- [12] Pine, B. J., II, & Gilmore, J. H. (1999). *The experience economy: Work is theatre & every business a stage*. Harvard Business School Press.
- [13] Pine, B. J., II, & Gilmore, J. H. (2019). *The experience economy: Competing for customer time, attention, and money* (Updated ed.). Harvard Business Review Press.
- [14] Richards, G., & Hall, D. (Eds.). (2000). *Tourism and sustainable community development*. Routledge.
- [15] Schmitt, B. H. (2003). *Customer experience management: A revolutionary approach to connecting with your customers*. Wiley.
- [16] Spencer, L. M., & Spencer, S. M. (1993). *Competence at work: Models for superior performance*. John Wiley & Sons.
- [17] UNWTO. (2022). *Tourism and rural development: A policy guide for sustainable tourism*. World Tourism Organization.