

Practical guidance as a graduation modality and professional development in tourism: an Ecuadorian university case

A orientação real como modalidade de qualificação e treinamento vocacional em turismo: um caso de uma universidade equatoriana  
La guianza real como modalidad de titulación y formación profesional en turismo: un caso universitario ecuatoriano

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ABSTRACT

This research analyzes the incidence of academic and professional training in integrating the degree modality: the practical guidance in students of the National Tourism Guide career at the University of Tourism Specialties (UDET) in Quito, Ecuador. It is based on Kolb's experiential learning theory, which establishes a four-stage learning cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The study evaluates how this approach strengthens theoretical understanding and practical application of knowledge in future tourism professionals. For this purpose, a Holistic and Experiential Learning Evaluation Instrument (HELEI) was designed, which combines quantitative and qualitative methods to present results that show that this approach fosters better integration of theoretical knowledge with practical experience, strengthening meaningful learning, sustainability, and intercultural education. The research highlights the importance of consolidating practical guidance as a central axis in training tourist guides in Ecuador.

**Keywords:** Tour guides, practical guidance, experiential learning, holistic education, sustainability.

RESUMO

Esta pesquisa analisa a incidência da formação acadêmica e profissional na integração da modalidade de graduação: a orientação prática em alunos da carreira de Guia de Turismo Nacional na Universidade de Especialidades Turísticas (UDET) em Quito, Equador. Baseia-se na teoria de aprendizado experimental de Kolb, que estabelece um ciclo de aprendizado de quatro estágios: experiência concreta, observação reflexiva, conceitualização abstrata e experimentação ativa. O estudo avalia como essa abordagem fortalece a compreensão teórica e a aplicação prática do conhecimento em futuros profissionais de turismo. Para isso, foi elaborado um Instrumento de Avaliação de Aprendizagem Holística e Experiential (AAHE), que combina métodos quantitativos e qualitativos para apresentar resultados que mostram que essa abordagem promove uma melhor integração do conhecimento teórico com a experiência prática, fortalecendo a aprendizagem significativa, a sustentabilidade e a educação intercultural. A pesquisa destaca a importância de consolidar a orientação prática como um eixo central no treinamento de guias turísticos no Equador.

**Palavras-chave:** Guias de turismo, orientação prática, aprendizado experimental, educação holística, sustentabilidade.

RESUMEN

Esta investigación analiza la incidencia de la formación académica y profesional en la integración de la modalidad de titulación: la guianza real de los estudiantes de la carrera de Guía Nacional de Turismo de la Universidad de Especialidades Turísticas (UDET) en Quito, Ecuador. Se fundamenta en la teoría del aprendizaje experiencial de Kolb, que establece un ciclo de aprendizaje en cuatro etapas: experiencia concreta, observación reflexiva, conceptualización abstracta y experimentación activa. El estudio evalúa cómo este enfoque fortalece la comprensión teórica y la aplicación práctica de conocimientos en los futuros profesionales del turismo. Para ello, se diseñó un Instrumento de Evaluación de Aprendizaje Holístico y Experiencial (IEAHE), que combina métodos cuantitativos y cualitativos con el propósito de presentar resultados que muestren que este enfoque fomenta una mejor integración del conocimiento teórico con la experiencia práctica, fortaleciendo el aprendizaje significativo, la sostenibilidad y la educación intercultural. La investigación destaca la importancia de consolidar la guianza real como un eje central en la formación de guías turísticos en Ecuador.

**Palabras clave:** guías de turismo, guianza real, aprendizaje experiencial, educación holística, sostenibilidad.

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The research supports curriculum designers and educators in tourism to prioritize experiential methods, enhancing the alignment between academic content and real-world professional competencies in tourism guidance.

**Originality/value:**  
This study distinctively integrates Kolb's experiential model in the tourism educational context, offering relevant evaluative empirical evidence for practical learning in tourism education within the Ecuadorian and other emerging countries professional context.

## INTRODUCTION

The present research delves into the integration of practical guidance as a degree modality within the National Tourism Guide career at the *Universidad de Especialidades Turísticas* (UDET) in Quito, Ecuador. The study is based on Kolb's experiential learning theory, examining its incidence on the students' training and their preparation for the professional field of tourism.

The study is based on the premise that practical guidance, by providing direct and contextualized experiences, encourages students' participation in their formative process, resulting in more meaningful and lasting learning (Passarelli & Kolb, 2023). The experiential learning theory stresses the importance of direct experience in the construction of knowledge, conceiving learning as a dynamic process of transforming experience into applicable knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Overall, Kolb (2003) describes learning as a cycle of four interconnected stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation.

Effective teaching in tourism management faces two key challenges: understanding students' diverse learning styles and encouraging more reflective, balanced learning approaches. Recognizing this diversity helps avoid surface-level learning often associated with the 'McDonaldization' of education (Lashley & Barron, 2006).

To evaluate the incidence of academic and professional training in the integration practical guidance, a Holistic and Experiential Learning Evaluation Instrument (HELEI) was designed, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The research is characterized as applied, with a mixed approach, and descriptive and experimental methods were employed, using survey and participant observation techniques. The population was constituted by the graduates of the National Tourism Guide career at UDET, selecting a representative sample of 93 graduates through a stratified random sampling.

Preliminary results indicate that practical guidance promotes a better integration of theoretical knowledge with practical experience, strengthening meaningful learning, sustainability and intercultural education. The importance of consolidating practical guidance as a central axis in the training of tourist guides in Ecuador is highlighted, presenting it as an innovative pedagogical strategy to promote experiential learning. This approach allows for a deep understanding and critical appraisal of Ecuador's natural and cultural environment, enriching intercultural education and promoting sustainable development.

The research also addresses the need to strengthen the degree process in the National Tourism Guide career at UDET, with the objective of consolidating a methodology that effectively articulates theory and practice. Through a process structured in four key steps, future professionals could ratify their knowledge, strengthen their skills and demonstrate their ability to apply values in the work context, facilitating their effective integration into the tourism market. Practical guidance is aligned with Kolb's (2003) experiential learning theory, providing an environment in which students actively participate in real and meaningful experiences (Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

### **Theoretical foundation**

#### **Practical guidance and holistic Education**

Practical guidance facilitates the development of direct experiences in tourist environments, encourages critical reflection, facilitates the construction of conceptual models and encourages students to apply their new knowledge in different contexts (Al Issa et al., 2025). Through participation in traditional practices and immersion in natural environments, students not only acquire academic knowledge, but also develop a sense of identity and respect for their cultural heritage and the environment (Binbin et al., 2024).

This approach allows them to experience the interrelationship between culture, nature and personal identity, promoting a more critical understanding of the world and its social complexity (Garland & Batty, 2021). Holistic education emphasizes the integration of knowledge with personal and social development.

#### **Educational anthropology and contextual integration**

Educational anthropology and the valorization of local knowledge are essential to understand the importance of practical guidance in the training of tourist guides (Albrecht et al., 2022; Leite & Graburn, 2009). Tourism education should not only focus on the acquisition of information, but also on the ability to recognize and respect the cultural richness of each destination. Practical guidance, by focusing on the transmission of ancestral knowledge, contributes to its revalorization, integrating it into the educational context and showing its applicability in the contemporary world.

Contextualized learning, supported by the theories of Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989), holds that knowledge is more meaningful when it is acquired in its context of application. From a constructivist perspective, practical guidance allows students to construct their own knowledge from previous and new experiences, aligning with the postulates of Piaget and

Ausubel (Bryce & Blown, 2024) on meaningful learning. The incorporation of practical guidance as a degree and professional training strategy in tourism implies the application of educational approaches based on experience and student participation.

Practical guidance emphasizes the importance of sustainability in professional practice, integrating principles of conservation of the natural and cultural environment in its methodology (Kustova, Hudenko & Lace, 2024; Passarelli & Kolb, 2023). At UDET, the practical guidance is consolidated as the degree modality for students of the National Tourism Guide career, giving them the opportunity to validate and demonstrate their acquired competencies. This process is developed through four structured steps that guarantee an integral and applied learning experience: definition and delivery of the case to be developed; itinerary design (2 days, 1 night); execution of the guide in English, and delivery of the final document in English.

## METHODS

The research adopts a mixed approach and is characterized as applied research (McKim, 2017). Descriptive and experimental methods were used, employing survey and participant observation techniques with instruments such as a questionnaire with closed questions and Likert scales (Robinson, 2024). The abstract conceptualization was analyzed through the content analysis (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017) of the dissertations submitted by the Tourist Guide graduates.

### Sampling, Data Collection and Analysis

For stratified random sampling, graduates are grouped into year intervals. Content analysis is a very useful and appropriate tool for assessing abstract conceptualization in learning products (Morris, 2020; Walliman & Walliman, 2021).

The research discusses the relevance of practical guidance as an effective methodology for the training of tour guides, by integrating theory and practice, promoting experiential learning and sustainability towards the appreciation of cultural and natural heritage. The results obtained suggest that this pedagogical approach contributes significantly to the development of competent professionals committed to responsible tourism. Each value in the sample size column was obtained using the equation:

$$\text{Proportion} = (\text{Number of graduates in the group} / \text{Total number of graduates}) * 100 \text{ (Equation 1)}$$

**Table 1.** Study sample data

Year of Graduation	Population	Proportion (%)	Sample Size (47 students)
2000 - 2005	10	10.75%	5
2006 - 2010	15	16.13%	8
2011 - 2015	20	21.51%	10
2016 - 2020	48	51.61%	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>47</b>

**Note.** Authors' development with the research data

A 50% sample of the population ensured a high representativeness of the total population, which was essential to obtain accurate and relevant results. Data collection was carried out during and at the end of the itinerary through surveys, travel diaries, hands-on projects and other methods mentioned above. A mixed approach was used for the analysis of the data collected (McKim, 2017), combining statistical methods for quantitative data and content analysis for qualitative data.

Once the suggestions from the pilot application had been reviewed and applied, the questionnaire was uploaded to the Forms platform. As of August 15, 2024, the survey link was sent to the emails registered in the graduate database, as well as through the Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp applications. Data processing was performed with statistical software for quantitative analysis, while qualitative analysis was carried out using content analysis techniques, which allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of the degree process (Walliman & Walliman, 2021).

Ethical considerations in this study encompassed obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and maintaining voluntary participation, aligning with the ethical standards outlined by Taylor (2021) in "Exploring Ethical Considerations in Educational Research." Taylor emphasizes the necessity of adhering to ethical guidelines to protect participants' rights and uphold the integrity of the research process.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Concrete experience

In experiential learning, concrete experience is the first stage of the learning cycle. It involves direct involvement in a new experience or situation (Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Passarelli & Kolb, 2023). The findings (presents in Table 1) reveal that experiential engagement, particularly through direct interaction with tourists, emerged as a central factor in participants' understanding of tourism and local practices.

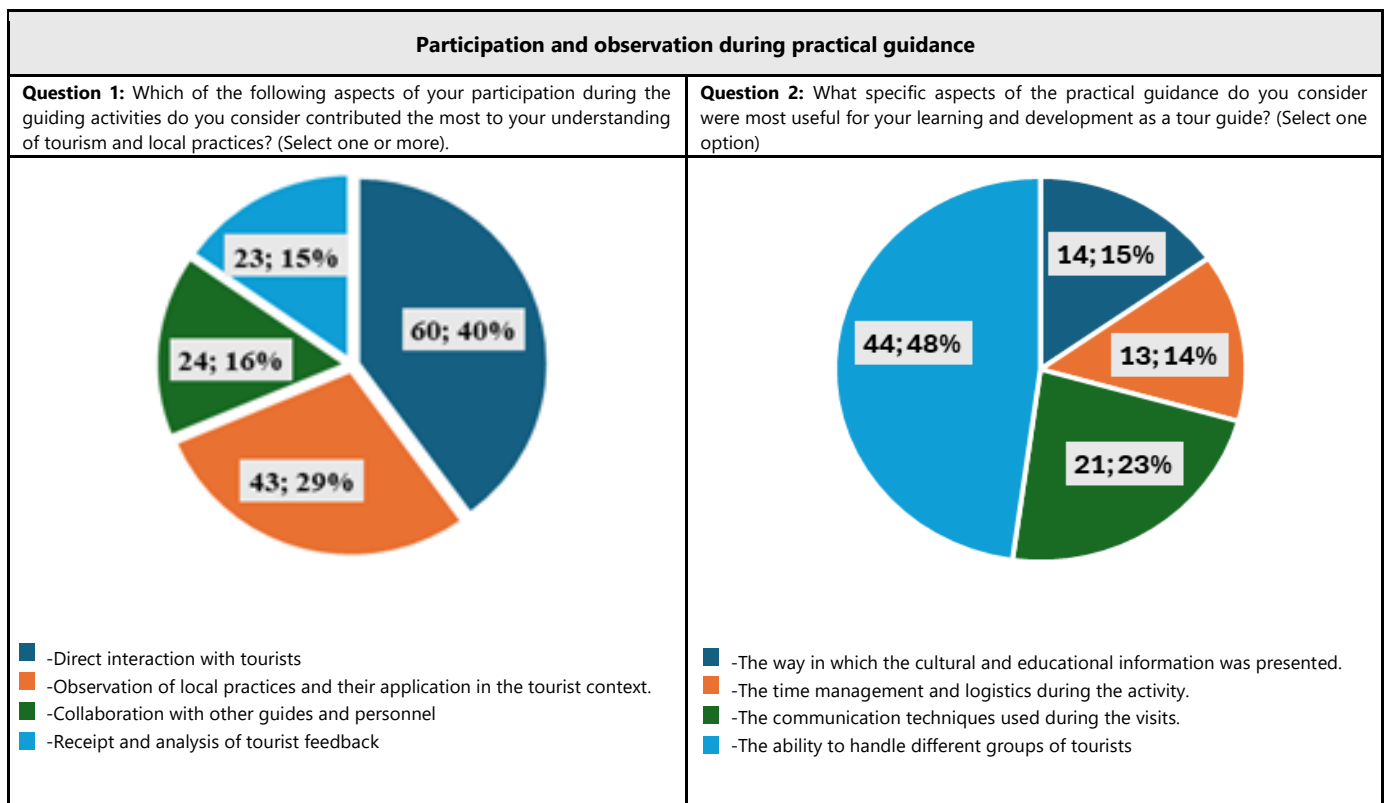
This discloses the pedagogical value of immersive, real-world exposure in shaping the interpretive and communicative competencies essential to guiding (Muscat & Mollicone, 2013). Notably, 40% of respondents identified these interactions as the most influential, suggesting that beyond theoretical frameworks, it is the immediacy of interpersonal exchange that facilitates deeper cultural awareness and adaptive learning. Concurrently, 48% of participants emphasized the structured delivery of cultural and educational content as the most beneficial element in their professional development.

This indicates that the efficacy of tour guiding is not only contingent on what is conveyed, but on how information is curated and contextualized (Casillo et al, 2019). At the end it represents a reflection of the critical intersection between content mastery and narrative technique in the cultivation of professional tour guides.

In addition to the value of direct tourist engagement, interactions with local experts and practitioners were found to play a critical role in deepening guides' cultural literacy and communicative competence (Table 2). A significant 65% of respondents acknowledged these exchanges as instrumental in improving their understanding of local traditions and capacity to interpret and convey cultural practices. This finding underscores the pedagogical imperative of integrating local voices into tour guide training curricula, not merely as supplementary input but as foundational to the accurate and respectful transmission of cultural heritage (Ormon & Vietti, 2022).

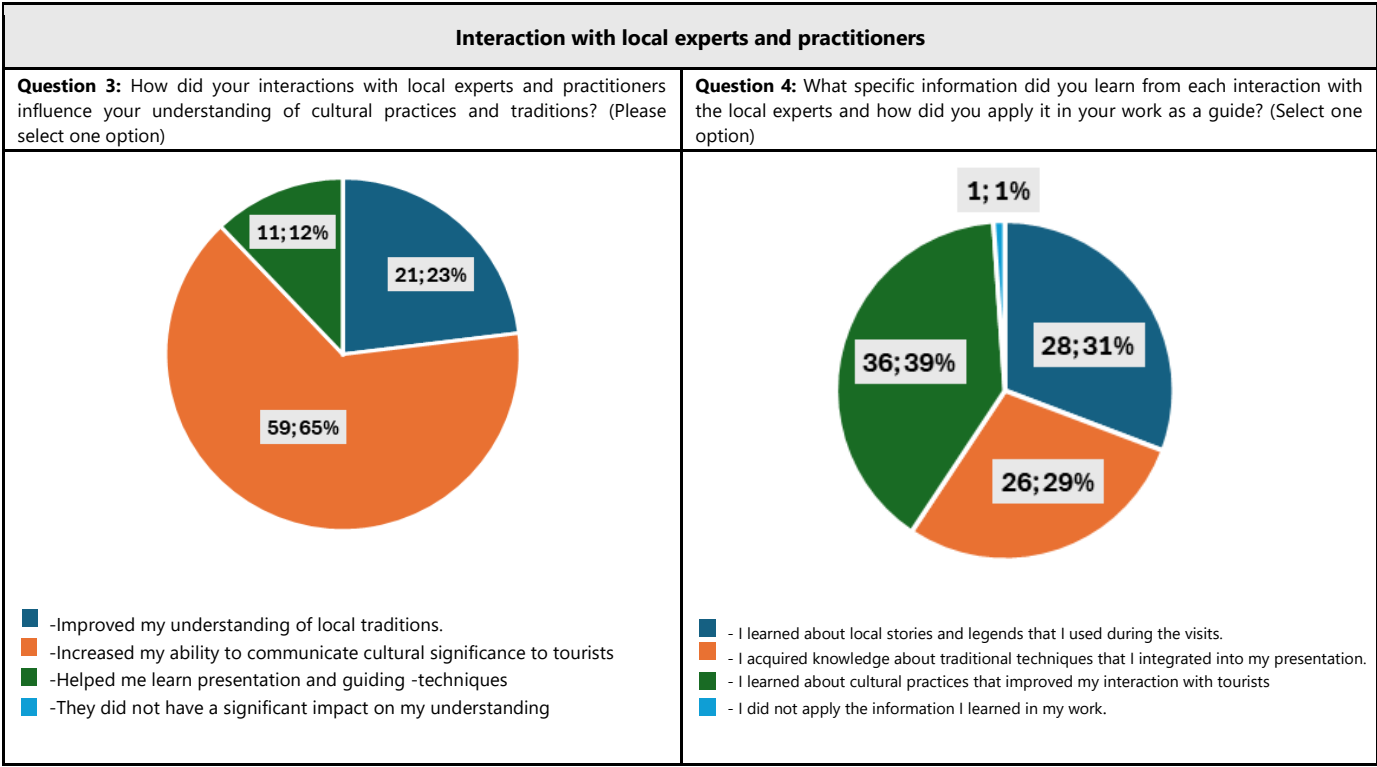
Furthermore, 39% of participants reported that such interactions directly informed their communication with tourists, enabling more engaging and culturally grounded narratives. These insights suggest that local expert engagement serves a dual function: it fosters epistemological depth and supports the relational dimension of guiding by enabling practitioners to mediate between cultures with greater sensitivity and precision (Higuchi & Yamanaka, 2017).

**Table 2.** Concrete experience: Participation and observation



**Note.** Authors' development with the research data

**Table 3.** Concrete experience: Participation and observation



**Note.** Authors' development with the research data

**Reflective observation**

In the second stage labelled as 'reflective observation', learners observe and reflect on that concrete experience (Barker et al., 2016). The role of observed practices (Table 4) during practical guidance was also identified as a significant contributor to the enrichment of participants' existing knowledge of tourism and culture (Lashley & Barron, 2006). A substantial 84% of respondents reported that these experiences did not merely reaffirm prior learning but expanded and contextualized it, enabling a more integrated understanding of the cultural dimensions inherent in tourism work.

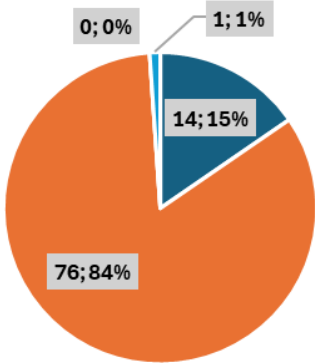
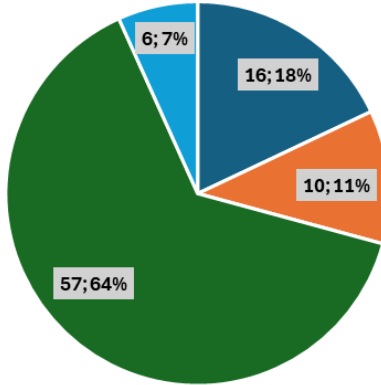
This suggests that experiential learning—particularly when grounded in real-world observation—functions as a catalyst for deeper cognitive engagement, bridging theoretical foundations with lived cultural realities (Ng et al., 2009). Moreover, 64% of participants emphasized the importance of effectively incorporating these observed practices into the actual tourism experience.

From a cultural and educational standpoint, this highlights the value of experiential relevance: embedding authentic cultural expressions into guided tours not only elevates the quality of the visitor experience but also reinforces the guide's interpretive skills (Csapo, 2012). This result support a pedagogical approach that privileges immersion, critical observation, and reflective integration as core to the formation of culturally competent tourism professionals.

The observed practices during the practical guidance were also critically perceived in terms of their broader implications for cultural conservation and sustainable tourism (Table 5). An overwhelming 80% of respondents acknowledged the significant role these practices play in preserving cultural heritage and fostering sustainable tourism behaviors. This reflects a growing awareness among graduates of the ethical dimensions of tourism, where cultural authenticity and environmental stewardship must be actively maintained rather than passively consumed (Sharma & Sodani, 2024; Ye, Qin & Wu, 2024). The findings suggest that practical exposure not only enhances operational skills but also cultivates, in diverse senses, a deeper sentiment of responsibility toward the communities and traditions that constitute the core of the tourism experience.

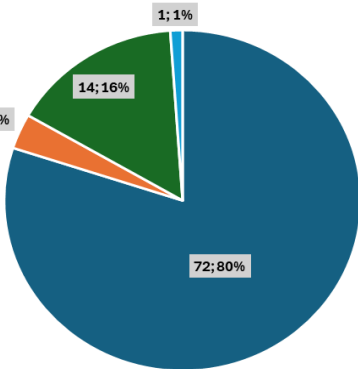
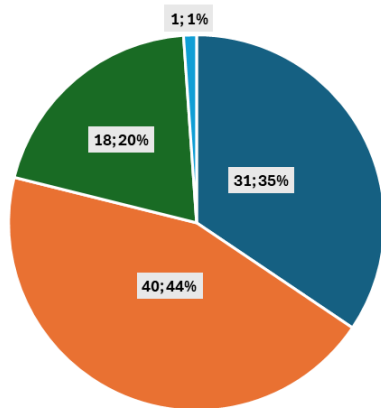
On the other hand, 44% of participants identified the potential of these practices to inform and improve tourism management strategies. This indicates that beyond their immediate pedagogical value, such practices offer critical insights for the development of more adaptive and sustainability-oriented tourism models (Jamal, 2004). As such, the integration of these experiences into training programs is essential not only for skill acquisition but also for shaping future professionals capable of contributing meaningfully to the long-term viability of the tourism sector. Of course, a look towards experimentation will also allow to strategically identify the feasibility and development of tourism projects related to practical guiding.

**Table 4.** Reflective observation: observed practices

Personal reflexivity	
<b>Question 5:</b> How do you think the practices observed during your practical guidance challenged or complemented your previous knowledge of tourism and culture? (Select one option)	<b>Question 6:</b> What elements of the observed practices do you consider most relevant from a cultural and educational perspective?
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Challenged my previous beliefs</li> <li>-They complemented my knowledge and enriched my perspective.</li> <li>- Did not have a significant impact on my prior knowledge</li> <li>- I cannot identify any other impact</li> </ul>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The authenticity of cultural practices</li> <li>-The educational relevance of the information provided.</li> <li>-The way in which these practices are integrated into the tourist experience</li> <li>-The way in which tourists responded to these practices</li> </ul>

**Note.** Authors' development with the research data

**Table 5.** Critical analysis and implications for tourism

Critical perception	
<b>Question 7:</b> What impact do you think the observed practices have on cultural conservation and sustainability? (Select one option)	<b>Question 8:</b> How could the observed practices influence the development of sustainable tourism strategies in the region? (Select one option)
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Promote natural conservation and sustainability.</li> <li>-Do not have a clear impact on cultural conservation or sustainability</li> <li>-They can have a negative impact if not properly managed.</li> <li>-They only have an impact on sustainability with no relationship to cultural conservation.</li> </ul>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Provide ideas for integrating sustainability into the tourism offer.</li> <li>-Allow for the identification of areas for improvement in tourism management.</li> <li>-They offer examples of success that can be replicated.</li> <li>-I do not observe such impacts</li> </ul>

**Note.** Authors' development with the research data

## Experimentation

The development of guidance projects emerged as a critical area where graduates envisioned the practical application of their training (Cheverst et al., 2000; Black & Ham, 2005). Nearly half of the respondents (48%) proposed the creation of interactive tours that incorporate the cultural practices observed during their training, signaling a clear shift toward more immersive, experience-based tourism offerings. This preference suggests a growing recognition of the value in engaging tourists not merely as spectators but as participants in culturally meaningful experiences (Su et al., 2016). Equally important is the emphasis placed on ethical engagement with host communities; 52% of graduates stressed that direct collaboration with local communities is essential for ensuring that such projects are both respectful and sustainable. This



approach reflects a maturing understanding of tourism as a dialogical process, one that must align with local interests to foster genuine cultural exchange and long-term viability (Sharma & Sodani, 2024).

In assessing the potential impact of these proposed initiatives, 38% of respondents identified tourist satisfaction and feedback surveys as the most effective evaluative tools. These mechanisms provide immediate and practical insights into visitor experience, allowing for real-time adjustments and a responsive approach to cultural and educational promotion. Furthermore, half of the respondents (50%) emphasized the necessity of community participation in both the design and implementation stages of tourism projects. This participatory model not only supports community agency and cultural integrity but also enhances the legitimacy and sustainability of tourism initiatives. This scenario illustrates a shift toward co-creative, community-centered approaches in tour guiding, grounded in responsiveness, mutual respect, and long-term impact (Su et al., 2016).

**Table 6.** Development of guidance projects

Guidance projects	
<b>Question 9:</b> What type of project or proposal would you develop to integrate the aspects observed during the tour guide training into your work as a tour guide? (Select one option)	<b>Question 10:</b> How would you implement this project to ensure an enriching and respectful tourism experience with the local communities? (Select one option)
<p>                     - An educational program about the local culture for tourists.                      - An interactive tour that includes observed cultural practices                      - A feedback system to enhance the tourism experience                      - A workshop for tour guides on the integration of local practices                 </p>	<p>                     - Collaborating with the local communities for design and implementation.                      - Incorporating feedback from tourists                      - Establishing a training plan for guides and staff                      - Ensuring compliance with sustainable tourism norms and standards                 </p>

**Note.** Authors' development with the research data

**Table 7.** Project impact assessment

Impact of guidance project	
<b>Question 11:</b> How would you evaluate the effectiveness and potential impacts of your proposed project in terms of cultural and educational promotion? (Select one option)	<b>Question 12:</b> What steps would you take to ensure that the project is beneficial to both tourists and local communities? (Please select one option)
<p>                     - Through tourist satisfaction and feedback surveys.                      - Through observation of changes in tourist behavior                      - Evaluating participation and satisfaction of local communities                      - Comparing the success of the project with similar projects in the region.                 </p>	<p>                     - Establishing feedback and continuous adjustment mechanisms.                      - Ensuring the participation of the local communities in the project.                      - Implementing impact assessment and adaptation measures.                      - Carrying out awareness and education campaigns for tourists and communities.                 </p>

**Note.** Authors' development with the research data

**Table 8.** Content analysis of academic production

Category	Description	Evaluation Scale	Comments	Year of Graduation	Total Population	Sample Size	Application of Theoretical Concepts (%)	Critical Reflection (%)	Innovation and Adaptation (%)	Interculturality and Sustainability (%)
<b>Theorization of Experiences</b>	Identification and articulation of theoretical concepts from concrete experiences lived during the practical guidance.	[ ] 1: Absent [ ] 2: Low [3: Medium [4: High [5: Very High	Average rating: 3.75	2000 - 2005	10	5	80% (4)	60% (3)	40% (2)	50% (2.5)
				2006 - 2010	15	8	85% (6.8)	75% (6)	50% (4)	60% (4.8)
				2011 - 2015	20	10	90% (9)	80% (8)	60% (6)	70% (7)
				2016 - 2020	48	24	95% (22.8)	85% (20.4)	80% (19.2)	85% (20.4)
				<b>Total</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>91.28% (42.6)</b>	<b>80.85% (37.4)</b>	<b>68.09% (32)</b>	<b>75.96% (34.7)</b>
<b>Theory-Practice Connection</b>	The student's ability to connect abstract theories with the practice of tour guiding.	[ ] 1: Absent [ ] 2: Low [3: Medium [4: High [5: Very High		2000 - 2005	10	5	80% (4)	60% (3)	40% (2)	50% (2.5)
				2006 - 2010	15	8	85% (6.8)	75% (6)	50% (4)	60% (4.8)
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<b>Conceptual Depth</b>	Level of sophistication and depth in the development of abstract ideas and theoretical concepts.	[ ] 1: Absent [ ] 2: Low [3: Medium [4: High [5: Very High	Average rating: 3.75	2000 - 2005	10	5	80% (4)	60% (3)	40% (2)	50% (2.5)
				2006 - 2010	15	8	85% (6.8)	75% (6)	50% (4)	60% (4.8)
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<b>Critical Reflection</b>	Critical evaluation of the applied theories, considering their relevance and adequacy to the described experiences.	[ ] No [ ] Yes	Average rating: 3.25	2000 - 2005	10	5	80% (4)	60% (3)	40% (2)	50% (2.5)
				2006 - 2010	15	8	85% (6.8)	75% (6)	50% (4)	60% (4.8)
				2011 - 2015	20	10	90% (9)	80% (8)	60% (6)	70% (7)
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				<b>Total</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>91.28% (42.6)</b>	<b>80.85% (37.4)</b>	<b>68.09% (32)</b>	<b>75.96% (34.7)</b>
<b>Conceptual Innovation</b>	Development of new ideas or theories derived from the combination of existing concepts with practical experiences.	[ ] 1: Absent [ ] 2: Low [3: Medium [4: High [5: Very High	Average rating: 3.37	2000 - 2005	10	5	80% (4)	60% (3)	40% (2)	50% (2.5)
				2006 - 2010	15	8	85% (6.8)	75% (6)	50% (4)	60% (4.8)
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**Note.** Authors' development with the research data

The analysis and interpretation of the results focuses on evaluating how the graduates of the UDET Tourism Guide program apply, reflect and adapt theoretical and practical concepts in their professional field.

**Theorization of Experiences.** This category evaluates the ability to identify and articulate theoretical concepts from concrete experiences. The results show an overall average of 91.28% in the application of theoretical concepts, with the highest score (95%) in the 2016-2020 period, suggesting a solid integration of theories into practical experiences.

**Theory-Practice Connection.** The ability to connect abstract theories with practice is evaluated. The overall average is also 91.28%, with the highest score in the 2016-2020 period (95%). This indicates an improvement in the integration of theory and practice in recent educational programs, benefiting graduates by applying concepts in real situations.

**Conceptual Depth.** This category assesses the level of sophistication and depth in the development of abstract ideas. The overall average is 91.28%, with a high score in 2016-2020 (95%). This suggests that current graduates are developing deeper ideas compared to previous years.

**Critical Reflection.** Critical evaluation of the theories applied in relation to the experiences described is assessed. The average score is 80.85%, with a particularly high score in the 2016-2020 period (85%), indicating a greater capacity for critical reflection among more recent graduates.



**Conceptual Innovation.** The development of new ideas or theories derived from the combination of existing concepts with practical experiences is valued. The overall average is 68.09%, with a notable increase in the 2016-2020 period (80%). This shows a growing trend in the ability of graduates to innovate from the combination of theory and practice.

In summary, the results reflect a general improvement in the ability of graduates to apply, connect and reflect on theoretical concepts over time, with a particularly positive trend in recent years. The ability to innovate and adapt has also increased, indicating that recent graduates are more likely to develop new ideas and apply theoretical concepts in practical situations. It is suggested that educational strategies continue to focus on strengthening the integration of theory and practice, promoting critical reflection and innovation, to continue to advance the quality and depth of the training offered (Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009).

## Discussion

Experiential learning, according to Kolb (2003), is fundamental for the training of tour guides, especially in Ecuador, where interaction with the cultural and natural environment is key. Students value direct experience in tourist destinations, highlighting the concrete experience of the Kolb cycle, which allows the internalization of theoretical concepts and the acquisition of practical skills. Reflective observation is significant, as post-practice reflection improves performance and adjusts knowledge to the realities of the job, corroborating the importance of reflection in learning (Terry, 2001). Abstract conceptualization is reflected in the students' ability to transform experiences into theoretical frameworks, applying what they have learned in future situations (Morris, 2020). The content analysis shows that students integrate theories of tourism marketing, destination management and sustainability.

Active experimentation is evidenced in the students' ability to apply what they have learned immediately in new guidelines, generating innovative solutions. This coincides with theories of educational anthropology that value local knowledge. The appreciation of local knowledge reinforces the importance of cultural knowledge and the need to develop competencies to manage the cultural and natural diversity of tourism destinations (Blau & Panagopoulos, 2022; Pu et al., 2023; Davies et al., 2002). Students indicate that their knowledge of local traditions and practices enriches their professional performance.

The incorporation of this knowledge in training underlines the relevance of an inclusive educational approach that respects cultural heritage, promoting a professional ethic based on sustainability and respect for local communities (Su et al., 2016; Sharma & Sodani, 2024). The experiential learning model (Terry, 2001; Passarelli & Kolb, 2023) combined with the integration of local knowledge, promotes a broader vision of tourism as a tool for sustainable development and preservation of cultural heritage.

## FINAL REMARKS

The integration of real-life guiding into the educational process fosters deeper learning, allowing students to be protagonists in direct experiences that integrate theory and practice. This generates meaningful and contextualized learning, essential for understanding and valuing Ecuador's natural and cultural environment.

It highlights the need for holistic education that integrates academic knowledge with personal and emotional development, preparing tour guides to be responsible and aware of their impact on local communities. The emotional and cognitive connection with the experience facilitates the retention of information and the practical application of knowledge. Participation in real experiences allows students to achieve a deeper and more lasting understanding of educational content, stimulating creativity and the ability to innovate and apply their knowledge in new situations. Critical reflection on experiences develops analytical skills essential for complex understanding of reality and problem solving.

Practical guidance facilitates the encounter with different cultures and practices, promoting understanding and respect for cultural diversity, fostering a more inclusive and global education. This contributes to the preservation of traditions in the context of tourism. The proposed matrix will allow measuring the educational impact of the practical guidance, evaluating the academic, personal and social development of the students, which is crucial to train tour guides who will be agents of change in their communities.

The results reflect a general improvement in the graduates' ability to apply, connect and reflect on theoretical concepts over time, with a positive trend in recent years. The ability to innovate and adapt has also increased, indicating that recent graduates are more likely to develop new ideas and apply theoretical concepts in practical situations. It is emphasized that educational strategies should continue to focus on strengthening the integration of theory and practice, promoting critical reflection and innovation. This will allow further progress in the quality and depth of the training offered. The results and analysis provide a detailed view of the impact of academic training on the professional practice of graduates, serving as a basis for future improvements in UDET's curriculum and educational strategies.

## Limitations and future research

This study is limited to a single university and focuses exclusively on the National Tourism Guide program, which may restrict the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the use of the HELEI instrument, though innovative, would benefit from further validation across broader educational contexts. Future research should consider longitudinal studies and cross-institutional comparisons to assess the long-term impact of experiential learning models in tourism prioritizing emerging and developing economies that need to build and advance not only in their concrete tourism structure but also in the capacities of their tourism education systems.

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#### Contribution of each author to the manuscript:

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A. theoretical and conceptual foundations and problematization:	40%	30%	30%
B. data research and statistical analysis:	40%	30%	30%
C. elaboration of figures and tables:	40%	30%	30%
D. drafting, reviewing and writing of the text:	40%	30%	30%
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