

ORIGINAL ARTICLE**Towards a Competency-Based Training Model for Adventure Tourism Guides in Iran**Sajad Ghasempour¹, Reza Andam^{2*}, Hasan Bahrololoum³

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EXTENDED A B S T R A C T**Introduction**

Adventure tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing sectors in the global tourism industry, attracting individuals who seek not only physical activity and excitement but also meaningful and transformative encounters with nature and culture. This form of tourism typically involves activities such as mountaineering, rafting, skydiving, caving, and wildlife trekking, often conducted in challenging and dynamic environments. In this context, the role of adventure tourism guides is indispensable. Guides not only ensure the physical safety and comfort of tourists but also serve as cultural interpreters, environmental educators, and facilitators of profound personal experiences. Their actions and competencies significantly influence the perceived quality of the tour, tourist satisfaction, and the overall success of the tourism operation. Despite the critical nature of their role, most educational models for guides have been designed in Western or developed contexts, leaving a significant gap in locally grounded training systems in developing countries.

In Iran, adventure tourism has experienced a steady growth in recent years, driven by the country's diverse landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and increasing domestic interest in outdoor activities. However, this growth has not been matched by the development of standardized, competency-based training programs for guides. Existing training initiatives are often fragmented, inconsistent, and disconnected from the practical realities of the field. There is a lack of integration between theoretical knowledge and field-based practice, and the educational content frequently overlooks essential competencies such as cultural sensitivity, sustainability practices, leadership, and the use of new technologies. Given these shortcomings, there is an urgent need to develop a comprehensive, contextually relevant, and scalable training model that aligns with international best practices while addressing the specific needs and constraints of Iran's tourism environment. This study was thus conducted to fill this gap by designing a competency-based training model tailored to the Iranian context, informed by both global literature and the lived experiences of local stakeholders.

Methodology

To achieve the objective of designing a competency-based training model for adventure tourism guides in Iran, a qualitative research methodology was employed. This approach was deemed appropriate due to the complex, multifaceted, and context-dependent nature of the competencies required in adventure tourism. The research was conducted within an interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes understanding the subjective experiences, beliefs, and meanings attributed by individuals. This orientation was crucial in capturing the nuanced insights of diverse stakeholders actively involved in the Iranian adventure tourism sector. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 22 participants, including experienced adventure guides, tour operators, managers of tourism agencies, government officials, training instructors, and academic researchers specializing in tourism education. The participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance and expertise, and snowball sampling was used to identify additional key informants.

The interviews were conducted over a three-month period through both in-person meetings and online platforms such as Google Meet and WhatsApp, depending on participants' availability and geographic location. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and followed an interview guide developed based on a comprehensive review of relevant literature on guide competencies and educational needs. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English to facilitate analysis. Thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke, was used to interpret the data. This involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. To ensure trustworthiness, the research incorporated strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing, and data triangulation across multiple sources. Additionally, inter-coder reliability was assessed through a test-retest method, achieving a high consistency rate of 92%.

Findings

The analysis of interview data resulted in the identification of four major domains of competencies required for adventure tourism guides: technical, individual, interpersonal, and sustainability-related competencies. Technical competencies included knowledge and skills in navigation, first aid, weather forecasting, equipment handling, environmental awareness, and the use of digital tools for trip planning and communication. These competencies were regarded as fundamental to ensuring safety and enhancing the operational effectiveness of adventure tours. For example, participants emphasized that guides must be capable of anticipating and managing risks in remote settings, using tools such as GPS, emergency communication devices, and weather apps. They must also be proficient in delivering essential safety briefings, operating specialized equipment like climbing gear or rafting boats, and applying first aid procedures when medical help is not immediately available.

Individual competencies, as highlighted by participants, include psychological resilience, physical fitness, adaptability, creativity, self-confidence, and a commitment to lifelong learning. Guides must possess a high degree of emotional stability and problem-solving ability to navigate unexpected challenges, such as changes in weather, interpersonal conflicts within the group, or logistical disruptions. Physical stamina is also crucial for enduring long treks, difficult terrain, or extreme environmental conditions. Many participants pointed out that a guide's attitude, demeanor, and inner motivation greatly influence group dynamics and tourist morale, particularly in high-pressure situations. Furthermore, ongoing professional development was emphasized as a marker of serious and committed professionals in the field.

Interpersonal competencies refer to the guide's ability to communicate effectively, demonstrate leadership, manage group dynamics, exhibit emotional intelligence, and foster a positive and inclusive group environment. These competencies are vital for building trust, facilitating meaningful interactions, and ensuring the smooth operation of the tour. Several participants highlighted the importance of storytelling, non-verbal communication, multilingual abilities, and cultural sensitivity in delivering high-quality guiding services. Guides must also be able to lead diverse groups, manage expectations, resolve conflicts, and promote ethical behavior. Participants noted that poor communication or lack of cultural awareness could result in misunderstandings, dissatisfaction, or even safety hazards.

The final domain, sustainability-related competencies, encompasses knowledge, values, and behaviors that promote environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and economic responsibility. Guides are expected to model and teach low-impact travel practices, support local economies by engaging with community-based services, and raise awareness about the significance of preserving natural and cultural heritage. For instance, participants reported practices such as reducing plastic waste, educating tourists on local customs, encouraging respectful photography, and promoting purchases from local artisans. These actions not only contribute to sustainable tourism development but also enhance the authenticity and educational value of the tourist experience.

Based on the identified competencies, a three-tiered training model was proposed. The beginner level focuses on foundational knowledge and skills such as safety procedures, basic communication, and environmental ethics. The intermediate level builds on this foundation with modules on risk management, cultural interpretation, group leadership, and advanced technical skills. The professional level is designed for experienced guides who lead complex, multi-day expeditions or work with international clients. This level includes specialized training in emergency response, intercultural communication, tour design, and innovative experience creation. Each level incorporates both theoretical instruction and field-based practice.

Discussion and Conclusion

The training model developed in this study represents a novel contribution to the field of adventure tourism education in Iran. It integrates global standards with local realities, offering a comprehensive and adaptable framework that can be implemented by government agencies, training institutions, and private sector stakeholders. The model's emphasis on four competency

domains ensures a balanced development of technical expertise, personal growth, interpersonal effectiveness, and sustainability awareness. The tiered structure allows for progression and differentiation based on experience and role complexity, enabling continuous learning and professional development throughout a guide's career. Furthermore, the inclusion of blended learning methodologies—such as online modules, in-field simulations, and mentoring—responds to the diverse learning needs and logistical constraints faced by trainees in Iran.

The research findings are consistent with international literature on adventure guide training. Studies conducted in Norway, Australia, and Canada have similarly identified the importance of integrating technical, interpersonal, and ethical competencies. However, this study advances the field by contextualizing these competencies within the socio-cultural, environmental, and institutional conditions of Iran. For instance, the emphasis on sustainability reflects both global imperatives and the specific ecological sensitivities of Iran's natural landscapes. The use of mentoring and storytelling draws from traditional learning methods and responds to the oral culture prevalent in many Iranian communities. Additionally, the proposed performance assessment system aligns with emerging trends in competency-based education, which prioritize practical demonstration over theoretical testing.

At a practical level, the proposed model has the potential to professionalize the guiding sector, enhance the reputation of Iranian adventure tourism, and contribute to national goals for sustainable development. It can improve tourist satisfaction and safety, foster local economic development, and reduce environmental degradation. By establishing clear competency benchmarks and certification standards, the model can also support the regulation of guide training and licensing, thereby reducing the risks associated with unqualified or underprepared personnel. Moreover, the model can facilitate international cooperation and knowledge exchange by aligning Iranian guide training with recognized global frameworks.

Nonetheless, the study is not without limitations. Its qualitative design and reliance on interviews from a specific group of stakeholders may limit the generalizability of findings. Future research should test the model's effectiveness using quantitative methods, such as surveys, experiments, or longitudinal studies. Comparative research across different regions or countries could also help refine the model and assess its transferability. Additionally, including the perspectives of tourists, tour companies, and international partners would provide a more holistic understanding of competency requirements and training outcomes. Despite these limitations, the study offers a solid foundation for further exploration and implementation of competency-based guide training in Iran.

In conclusion, this study provides a contextually grounded and theoretically informed framework for the training of adventure tourism guides in Iran. It highlights the multifaceted nature of guiding work and the need for integrated, progressive, and sustainable educational strategies. The proposed model offers a practical roadmap for improving the quality, safety, and cultural richness of adventure tourism experiences, while contributing to the broader goals of professionalization, sustainability, and global integration of the Iranian tourism industry.

KEYWORDS

Adventure Tourism, Competency-Based Training, Tour Guide Education, Training Model.

