



Indigenous Cultural Competence as a Distinctive Component of Community-Based Tourism Human Resource Quality: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis from the Mountainous Areas of Quang Ngai Province, Vietnam

Nguyen Doan Tuan

Trade Union University, Hanoi, Vietnam

* Corresponding Author: **Nguyen Doan Tuan**

Article Info

ISSN (online): 2583-8261

Impact Factor (RSIF): 8.41

Volume: 05

Issue: 05

Received: 20-06-2026

Accepted: 22-07-2026

Published: 24-08-2026

Page No: 01-08

Abstract

Standard frameworks for evaluating tourism human resource quality - including Vietnam's Tourism Occupational Standards and the ASEAN Tourism Competency Standards - were developed primarily for urban and mainstream tourism contexts, and consequently fail to capture the distinctive competencies required of tourism workers in destinations built around indigenous cultural heritage. This study employs reflexive thematic analysis of 15 in-depth interviews conducted with tourism enterprise managers, industry administrators, and training specialists in the mountainous areas of Quang Ngai Province to explore indigenous cultural competence as a component of tourism human resource quality. Results identify four main themes: indigenous ethnic knowledge as a foundational condition for service quality; competence in connecting with and interpreting indigenous resources; intercultural conduct in a multi-ethnic highland environment; and the gap between formal training systems and the practical competencies that indigenous tourism destinations actually require. These findings provide substantive grounds for proposing an extension of existing tourism human resource quality frameworks to include indigenous cultural competence as a distinct and independently structured component. They also offer a contextual mechanism to explain the companion quantitative study's finding that accumulated education and experience exerts the largest direct effect on tourism human resource quality in the structural model - a result that, in isolation, risks being misread as straightforward returns to formal credentialing rather than as the capture of deeply embedded indigenous knowledge that cannot be replicated through short-cycle occupational training.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJSSER.2026.5.5.01-08>

Keywords: indigenous cultural competence, tourism human resource quality, community-based tourism, reflexive thematic analysis, mountainous Quang Ngai, ethnic cultural tourism, multi-ethnic highland destinations

1. Introduction

Indigenous cultural tourism and community-based tourism have emerged as among the most rapidly growing segments of the global tourism industry, driven by increasing visitor demand for authentic, community-embedded experiences that differ fundamentally from the standardised offerings of mass tourism (Tolkach & King, 2015; UNWTO, 2019) ^[17]. Unlike mass tourism, which relies on infrastructural investment and codified service protocols, this segment makes an implicit promise to visitors: direct encounter with the living knowledge, practices and values of local communities. The quality of that promise depends, in an immediate and non-delegable way, on whether the workers delivering it possess a sufficient depth of understanding of the cultural world they are representing. In this context, the question of tourism human resource quality is not

reducible to a question of occupational skill standards; it implicates a form of competence that is culturally specific, slow to develop, and cannot be adequately approximated by any existing accredited training programme (Salazar, 2012; Zeppel, 2006)^[14, 19].

The mountainous areas of Quang Ngai Province-incorporating the territory of the former Kon Tum Province and the traditional highland districts of Quang Ngai following the recent administrative merger - constitute one of the most ethnically diverse territorial units in mainland Southeast Asia. The region is home to more than 28 distinct ethnic groups, most prominently the Xơ Đăng, Ba Na, Gia Rai, Hrê, Ca Dong, Rơ Măm and Brâu peoples, whose cultural landscapes, oral traditions, ceremonial systems and material heritage form the primary resource base for the area's tourism identity (People's Committee of Quang Ngai Province, 2022)^[13]. The provincial tourism development strategy for 2021–2030 identifies cultural-ecological-community tourism as the leading development priority, positioning the mountainous sub-region as a destination of distinctive character within the Central Highlands and East–West economic corridor. Yet the human resource development system currently operating in this area continues to apply training and evaluation frameworks designed for urban hospitality environments, producing a structural mismatch between what workers are trained to do and what the region's indigenous tourism products genuinely require.

In the international literature, cultural competence - broadly understood as the capacity to understand and engage effectively across cultural boundaries - has been extensively investigated in healthcare, education and public services (Cross *et al.*, 1989; Deardorff, 2006)^[7, 8]. Its application to tourism human resource quality, however, remains limited and methodologically underdeveloped. The dominant frameworks for assessing tourism worker competence, whether VTOS, the ASEAN Tourism Standards, or the capability models developed from Spencer and Spencer (1993)^[16], do not include a standalone component for indigenous cultural competence; at best, they subsume relevant behaviours within generic service attitude criteria in ways that fundamentally understate the strategic importance of indigenous knowledge for destination quality in this context.

This paper asks: how does indigenous cultural competence manifest and what significance does it carry in the practical delivery of tourism services in the mountainous areas of Quang Ngai Province, and to what extent do existing assessment frameworks capture or overlook these manifestations? The question is answered through reflexive thematic analysis of 15 in-depth interviews with managers, administrators and training specialists directly engaged in the training, deployment and evaluation of tourism workers in the study area. The findings extend the conceptual framework for tourism human resource quality to accommodate indigenous destination contexts, provide mechanism-level explanation for results from the companion quantitative study, and offer actionable implications for training reform and human resource policy at provincial, enterprise and institutional levels.

2. Theoretical Background and Research Gaps

2.1. Tourism Human Resource Quality and Current Assessment Frameworks

Tourism human resource quality is understood in the

scholarly literature as the constellation of competencies - encompassing knowledge, skills and attitudes - that enable workers to perform at a level that meets or exceeds the requirements of their occupational role and the expectations of visitors (Baum, 2006; Kusluvan *et al.*, 2010)^[1, 10]. This three-tier knowledge–skill–attitude architecture is broadly accepted, but the specific content of each tier varies considerably across tourism types and sociocultural contexts. Vietnam's Tourism Occupational Standards, issued by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in 2015^[11], constitute the most widely applied competence framework in Vietnamese tourism, covering 13 occupational domains from front office and housekeeping to food service and tour guiding. The ASEAN Tourism Standards organise competencies by occupational level, with structured performance criteria and certification conditions. Both systems share a common orientation: they foreground technically standardisable service skills, measurable through practical assessments and structured scenario testing, and both were designed around the operational logic of urban hotels and conventionally guided tours. Neither incorporates a component dedicated to the knowledge and values associated with indigenous ethnic cultures - a gap that is inconsequential for urban tourism contexts but operationally significant for community-based tourism in multi-ethnic highland settings.

The broader international literature on tourism human resource quality has enriched the basic framework with dimensions including service orientation and emotional labour (Karatepe, 2013)^[9] and the broader people management context shaping worker behaviour (Baum, 2006, 2015)^[1, 2]. Nonetheless, these contributions have been generated almost entirely in mass tourism or international hotel contexts, leaving the competence requirements of indigenous destination workers theoretically underspecified.

2.2. Community-Based Tourism and the Strategic Role of Indigenous Knowledge

Community-based tourism refers to tourism in which local communities - particularly ethnic minority communities - act as the primary agents in delivering experiences grounded in their own cultural and natural resources (Tolkach & King, 2015)^[17]. Workers in this segment occupy a dual role that distinguishes them categorically from workers in conventional tourism: they are simultaneously service providers and cultural intermediaries, responsible for bridging the visitor's frame of reference and the community's own world view (Salazar, 2012)^[14]. This dual responsibility entails a fundamentally different competence requirement.

Indigenous knowledge - encompassing community-specific understanding of natural environments, history, belief systems, ceremonial practices, cuisine and customary norms - constitutes the raw material from which indigenous tourism products derive their value (Zeppel, 2006)^[19]. Salazar's (2012)^[14] ethnographic research in Indonesia and Tanzania demonstrated that effective indigenous tourism guides excelled not because of their adherence to international service standards, but because they possessed the capacity to translate their community's story into meaningful experiences for visitors - a capacity acquired primarily through a life lived within the community, not through formal occupational training. Tolkach and King (2015)^[17], studying Pacific community-based tourism destinations, confirmed that local cultural knowledge is a stronger predictor of service quality

than occupational training credentials. These findings converge on a critical insight: informal knowledge capital, accumulated through community embeddedness, can create a distinctive contribution to service quality in indigenous tourism contexts that formal occupational training cannot replicate.

2.3. Cultural Competence in Services and Tourism

The concept of cultural competence was formalised in healthcare as the capacity to deliver services that are effective and appropriate across cultural boundaries (Cross *et al.*, 1989)^[7]. Deardorff's (2006)^[8] empirical synthesis identified three constitutive layers: awareness of cultural difference; substantive knowledge of the values, norms and communicative conventions of other cultures; and the behavioural capacity to adjust service interactions appropriately to different cultural contexts.

Tourism applications of this concept have grown but remain limited. In urban and international tourism, cultural competence is primarily constructed as the capacity to receive and respond appropriately to visitors from diverse cultural backgrounds - a competence directed outward, toward the visitor's culture. Indigenous tourism introduces an additional dimension that has received far less conceptual attention: the competence to understand, authentically represent and responsibly transmit one's own community's culture to outsiders - an outward-directed competence oriented not toward adapting to external cultures but toward accurately and ethically conveying one's own. This dimension is absent from conventional cultural competence frameworks precisely because those frameworks were developed for providers who interact with culturally different clients, not for individuals serving as living representatives of a specific cultural heritage to an outside audience.

2.4. Research Gaps

Three research gaps emerge from this review. First, no study has directly explored and theorised indigenous cultural competence as a component of tourism human resource quality in Vietnam, particularly in the high-density ethnic cultural landscapes of the Central Highlands and the newly merged highland territory of Quang Ngai Province. Second, the existing competence assessment frameworks for tourism workers in Vietnam do not incorporate this component, creating a structural risk of systematically undervaluing workers with deep indigenous knowledge but limited formal qualifications. Third, the international literature on cultural competence in indigenous tourism is concentrated in Oceania and Africa, with no empirical evidence from mainland Southeast Asian multi-ethnic highland contexts - a setting in which multiple distinct ethnic groups with different histories, territories and value systems share a common geographic space, generating intercultural complexity that single-group island contexts do not present.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative design grounded in an interpretivist philosophy, premised on the view that knowledge about social reality is constructed through the meanings that participants attach to their lived experiences and practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018)^[6]. This orientation is appropriate given the nature of the research question: the objective is not to measure or test but to explore and theorise

a phenomenon - the constitution and significance of indigenous cultural competence in tourism human resource quality - that has not been adequately specified in prior literature and for which no validated measurement instrument exists. A qualitative approach is also epistemologically aligned with the goal of generating conceptual insights grounded in the practical knowledge of those directly implicated in the phenomenon under study.

This paper reports findings from the qualitative phase of the dissertation's sequential mixed-methods design, conducted prior to the quantitative phase. The qualitative phase served two purposes: to inform the refinement of scale content for the subsequent measurement instrument; and to provide contextual explanatory depth for the structural model results reported in the companion quantitative study.

3.2. Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The analytic strategy is reflexive thematic analysis following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019)^[4]. Unlike theory-driven thematic analysis, the reflexive approach generates themes from the data inductively, allowing conceptual structures to emerge from participant accounts rather than being imposed by a pre-existing framework. This is the appropriate choice when the research aims to open conceptual space for new findings rather than confirm established categories - which is precisely the aim of this inquiry. The six-phase analytic process - data familiarisation, initial code generation, theme search, theme review and development, theme definition and naming, and report writing - was conducted iteratively, with a reflexive audit log maintained throughout to document coding decisions and analytic adjustments. Inter-rater reliability was assessed on 20% of transcripts using independent parallel coding by two research team members, yielding an acceptable level of agreement (Cohen's kappa = 0.74, above the 0.70 threshold recommended by Miles *et al.*, 2014)^[12].

3.3. Sample and Data Collection

The sample comprises 15 purposively selected participants, chosen using a criterion-based purposive sampling strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2018)^[6] designed to ensure diversity across organisational position, establishment type and ethnic identity. The sample includes six tourism enterprise managers from accommodation, tour operation and visitor attraction establishments - two of whom are ethnic minority individuals; four tourism industry administrators at provincial and district levels; three tourism human resource training specialists from vocational institutions and development support organisations; and two experienced tourism workers with more than a decade of field experience, one of whom is an ethnic Ba Na individual working as an indigenous guide at a community tourism village. Information saturation was assessed as emerging from the eleventh interview, with no new thematic material arising after the thirteenth.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in person in the study area during 2024–2025, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The interview guide addressed three thematic clusters: participants' perceptions of the competencies that constitute distinctive tourism human resource quality in the mountainous areas of Quang Ngai Province; competencies that existing training standards overlook or inadequately represent; and practical experience

with the deployment or training of workers with and without indigenous knowledge backgrounds. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim

and translated into standard Vietnamese for segments conducted partly in ethnic minority languages, with the assistance of a community interpreter.

Table 1: Characteristics of qualitative research participants

Code	Position / Role	Establishment Type	Ethnicity	Experience (years)
IV01	Director	3-star hotel	Kinh	14
IV02	Operations Manager	Tour operator	Kinh	11
IV03	Homestay owner	Community-based homestay	Xơ Đăng	8
IV04	Front Office Supervisor	Eco-tourism resort	Kinh	9
IV05	Director	Tour operator	Ba Na	13
IV06	Operations Manager	Resort	Kinh	12
IV07	Head of Tourism Management	Quang Ngai Provincial Dept. of Tourism	Kinh	16
IV08	Technical Officer	District Culture–Sports–Tourism Division	Kinh	10
IV09	Senior Administrator	Quang Ngai Provincial Dept. of Tourism	Kinh	18
IV10	Tourism Officer	District People's Committee, highland area	Xơ Đăng	7
IV11	Lecturer	College of Economics and Technology	Kinh	15
IV12	Lecturer	Vocational Training College	Kinh	12
IV13	Training Specialist	Development support organisation	Kinh	20
IV14	Indigenous Guide	Community tourism village	Ba Na	11
IV15	Service Worker	Tourism attraction	Kinh	8

4. Results: Four Main Themes

Analysis of the 15 interview transcripts identified four main themes, each comprising two to three core codes and

supported by consistent evidence from at least ten of the 15 participants. Table 2 summarises the thematic structure and level of evidential support.

Table 2: Summary of thematic structure and evidential support

Theme	Core codes	Participants confirming (n = 15)
1. Indigenous ethnic knowledge as foundational condition	In-depth cultural understanding; indigenous values as competitive advantage; limitations of credentials alone	14/15
2. Competence in interpreting and connecting to indigenous resources	Insider cultural storytelling; audience-adaptive interpretation; creating authentic experiential moments	13/15
3. Intercultural conduct in a multi-ethnic highland environment	Recognition of ethnic-specific taboos; management of sacred boundaries; responsible cultural commodification	11/15
4. Gap between formal training and required practical competence	Absence of local content in curricula; no recognition pathway for indigenous competence; weak training–community linkage	13/15

4.1. Indigenous Ethnic Knowledge as a Foundational Condition for Service Quality

The most consistently supported theme across the dataset concerns indigenous ethnic knowledge as a prerequisite that produces qualitatively different service outcomes in the highland tourism context of Quang Ngai Province. Fourteen of the 15 participants described a clear differentiation between workers who possess deep grounding in local cultural knowledge - the history of communities, the meaning of cultural spaces and objects, the timing and significance of ceremonial cycles, the customary norms of ethnic groups - and workers who possess only standardised occupational skills. The former, in consistent participant accounts, generated visitor experiences of a categorically different character: not better by degree on the same scale as conventional service quality, but different in kind.

Participants drew a recurrent and analytically important distinction between surface knowledge and depth knowledge. Surface knowledge is descriptive - knowing names, knowing outlines - and is acquirable through reading, classroom instruction or a short induction programme. Depth knowledge is interpretive and affective: understanding significance, sensing value, responding to visitor questions beyond the prepared script, and generating moments of genuine emotional connection between the visitor and the heritage being encountered. This form of knowledge, according to participants, develops through immersion - through growing up within a community, participating in its

ceremonies and seasonal rhythms, listening to its elders, and inhabiting its cultural landscape over many years. It is not generated by a training module, however well designed.

This characterisation aligns with the human capital theory concept of informal or tacit knowledge (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964)^[15, 31]: a form of knowledge capital that cannot be credentialised or rapidly produced, and whose presence or absence cannot be detected by reviewing an employee's educational record. In the indigenous tourism context, this means that the most policy-relevant form of human capital for destination quality is also the form least visible to the evaluation systems currently in use.

4.2. Competence in Interpreting and Connecting Indigenous Resources

The second theme, analytically related to but meaningfully distinct from the first, concerns the capacity to activate indigenous knowledge in the service of visitor experience - to translate cultural depth into communicative practice that creates value for an audience from a different cultural background. If the first theme describes *possessing* indigenous knowledge, this theme describes the capacity to *transmit* it in ways that generate experiential significance for the recipient.

Participants articulated this competence through several specific manifestations: the ability to narrate cultural resources through stories that connect with the visitor's existing knowledge and emotional registers; the ability to

adapt interpretive approach to different visitor types-domestic visitors with general curiosity, international visitors with cultural interest, researchers or specialist audiences; and the capacity to create what several participants described as a moment of genuine contact - when a visitor feels they have truly understood something that was previously opaque to them, and the experience becomes meaningful rather than merely informational.

This competence in indigenous interpretation is qualitatively different from the standard tour guide commentary skills taught in accredited guiding programmes, which transmit externally prepared information about a site according to a fixed script. Indigenous interpretation requires sufficient depth of knowledge to improvise, to respond to questions outside the prepared framework, and to narrate from an insider's perspective - from the standpoint of someone who has lived the culture rather than studied it at a remove. This distinction has significant theoretical implications: indigenous interpretation is not a variant of generic communication or presentation skill, but a form of cultural storytelling from within, inseparable from identity and community experience. This distinction is not represented in any element of VTOS or the current ASEAN Tourism Standards.

4.3. Intercultural Conduct in a Multi-Ethnic Highland Environment

The distinctive multi-ethnic character of the mountainous areas of Quang Ngai Province - incorporating both the ethnic communities of the former Kon Tum territory (Xơ Đăng, Ba Na, Gia Rai, Brâu, Rơ Măm) and the indigenous Highland Quang Ngai communities (Hrê, Ca Dong, Co) - generates a third dimension of indigenous cultural competence that has no equivalent in destinations built around a single, culturally homogeneous indigenous community. Workers in this environment must not only understand the culture of one ethnic group but must be capable of navigating a space in which multiple groups with different histories, territorial claims, sacred geographies and customary systems coexist, interact and, in some cases, hold values and rules that do not perfectly align.

Participants described three categories of situation in which this dimension becomes practically consequential. The first concerns knowledge of ethnic-specific taboos and behavioural norms: what must not be said, photographed or enacted in the ceremonial spaces of each community - and the relational consequences of inadvertent violation, not only for the visitor experience but for the relationship between the tourism enterprise and the local community. The second concerns the capacity to move between ethnic communities in a single tour itinerary without creating impressions of comparison or cultural hierarchy - to treat each community's heritage as having distinct and non-interchangeable value rather than positioning them as variations on a common theme. The third, raised by the most experienced participants and arguably the most analytically sophisticated, concerns the capacity to manage the process of cultural commodification responsibly: to know where the boundary lies between sharing cultural elements with visitors and encroaching on aspects of community life that are sacred, private or whose exposure would undermine their meaning - to understand, in effect, the ethics of putting culture on display.

This theme establishes that in the highland Quang Ngai context, cultural competence cannot be conceived as knowledge of a single cultural tradition but must encompass the capacity to operate in a space of structured inter-ethnic complexity, with attentiveness to power relations and boundary conditions that single-group indigenous tourism destinations do not generate. This dimension is absent from every extant tourism occupational standard in Vietnam, and has not been identified in the international literature on indigenous tourism in mainland Southeast Asia.

4.4. Gap Between Formal Training and Required Practical Competence

The fourth theme - and the one with the most direct systemic implications for policy - is participants' consistent and detailed description of the gap between what formal tourism training programmes currently provide and what highland Quang Ngai tourism enterprises actually need their workers to possess. This gap manifests along three identifiable dimensions.

The absence of local cultural content from training curricula.

The majority of enterprise managers and industry administrators reported that vocational tourism training programmes - whether delivered by institutions within the province or attended by students from the region at institutions elsewhere - employ standardised national curricula with no content relating to the ethnic minority cultures of the Central Highlands or highland Quang Ngai, no material on the specific natural and cultural resources of the study area, and no instruction in the guidance skills required to lead visitors through forest environments or traditional village settings. Graduates of these programmes may execute a hotel check-in procedure correctly but do not know the significance of a communal house (nhà rông), cannot distinguish the ceremonial dress of a Xơ Đăng elder from that of a Ba Na elder, and have no conceptual framework for the behavioural protocols appropriate when leading visitors into a traditional village.

The absence of any recognition pathway for indigenous competence. Because existing competence frameworks do not include a component for indigenous cultural competence, workers who possess this competence have no formal pathway by which it can be recognised, certified or translated into occupational advancement. This produces a structural inequity with direct motivational consequences: workers with the richest indigenous knowledge backgrounds - typically individuals from ethnic minority communities who have grown up within the cultural tradition in question - are systematically disadvantaged in recruitment and compensation systems that privilege formal credentials. Several participants identified this as a key mechanism in the attrition of the most culturally capable indigenous workers from the formal tourism labour market: the combination of low formal credentials and the absence of an alternative recognition system creates a career ceiling that formal qualification holders do not face, regardless of the relative quality of their actual contribution to destination experience.

The absence of a structured link between training institutions and indigenous communities. No systematic mechanism exists through which indigenous knowledge - held by community elders, ritual custodians and heritage-keepers - can be formally integrated into tourism training curricula. This represents simultaneously a waste of community knowledge resources and a structural constraint on the ability

of training institutions to produce graduates with the competence that highland indigenous tourism destinations actually require. Participants from training institutions acknowledged awareness of this gap but described the absence of an enabling framework - financial, contractual and pedagogical - as the primary barrier to addressing it.

5. Discussion

5.1. Extending the Tourism Human Resource Quality Framework

The four themes collectively establish that indigenous cultural competence is not a marginal skill element that can be incorporated as an additional behavioural indicator within an existing component - for example, as one more observed item within a service attitude scale - but rather a structurally distinct component with different content, a different developmental pathway and different measurement logic. This study proposes the formal addition of a sixth component - *indigenous cultural competence* - to the tourism human resource quality framework as it applies to indigenous destination contexts, structured across four sub-elements: depth indigenous ethnic knowledge; indigenous interpretive and storytelling competence; intercultural conduct in multi-ethnic environments; and ethical responsibility toward community cultural heritage.

Figure 1 (to be developed) would position this component alongside the five established components in the quantitative model (professional knowledge; occupational skills; service attitude and behaviour; foreign language and digital capability; occupational health and psychological resilience), with an explicit notation that unlike those five components - which are primarily developed and maintained through formal training and organisational human resource practices - indigenous cultural competence is developed chiefly through community embeddedness and the accumulation of informal indigenous knowledge, and therefore requires fundamentally different development and recognition mechanisms.

This proposal extends the competence framework of Spencer and Spencer (1993)^[16] by adding an indigenous knowledge layer and challenges standard-setting bodies - particularly those responsible for VTOS revision - to develop a parallel competence standard for community-based and indigenous tourism that is architecturally distinct from the existing standards for hotel operations and urban tour guiding.

5.2. Mechanism-Level Explanation for the Quantitative Findings

The thematic analysis provides a substantive mechanism-level explanation for a notable finding from the companion quantitative study: the variable representing accumulated education and experience exerts the largest direct effect on tourism human resource quality ($\beta = 0.207$), substantially exceeding the direct effects of organisational training ($\beta = 0.136$) and organisational support ($\beta = 0.143$). Without the qualitative context provided here, this finding risks being interpreted as a straightforward return to formal human capital investment - more years of schooling and more years in the job producing incrementally better workers. The qualitative data reveal a more specific and consequential interpretation: in the highland Quang Ngai indigenous tourism context, the observable variables constituting the accumulated education and experience construct - particularly items measuring years of local residency and

depth of familiarity with local cultural resources - function as indirect proxies for the entire stock of indigenous knowledge capital formed through community embeddedness. This is a form of human capital that formal occupational training cannot generate and that organisational training programmes cannot substitute for, which directly explains why its estimated effect in the structural model is larger than that of training-based interventions.

If this mechanism interpretation is correct, it carries an important methodological implication: separating formal educational attainment and occupational experience from indigenous knowledge accumulation into two independently measured constructs in future studies would allow the relative contribution of each to be estimated directly, rather than leaving the indigenous knowledge effect to be absorbed within a composite variable. The current study provides the qualitative basis for developing such measurement instruments.

The fourth theme - the training-practice gap - also provides contextual explanation for another quantitative result: the total indirect effect of organisational training on human resource quality (0.091), channelled through motivation and job satisfaction, substantially amplifies the modest direct effect ($\beta = 0.136$). When workers perceive that their organisation invests in training - even when the training content does not yet adequately incorporate indigenous knowledge - they respond positively in motivational terms through the mechanisms described by Social Exchange Theory. The signal of investment matters for motivation independently of whether the content of that investment fully addresses the competence requirements of the role.

5.3. Comparison with International Literature and Theoretical Contribution

The findings are consistent with Salazar (2012)^[14] and Tolkach and King (2015)^[17] in confirming that informal community knowledge is an irreplaceable constituent of service quality in indigenous tourism contexts, and with Zeppel (2006)^[19] in confirming the dual role of indigenous tourism workers as both service providers and cultural mediators. The distinctive contribution of this study, relative to this prior work, lies in two areas. First, the study offers a more structurally explicit characterisation of indigenous cultural competence, articulating its four sub-elements in a way that is directly applicable to the design of assessment instruments and training programmes. Second - and more significantly in terms of theoretical novelty - the study identifies the dimension of intercultural conduct in a multi-ethnic environment as a competence requirement that single-group indigenous tourism destinations do not generate, but that continental multi-ethnic highland settings generate in a persistent and operationally consequential way. This finding suggests that the mountainous areas of provinces like Quang Ngai, with their co-habitation of multiple ethnically distinct communities within a shared geographic space, present a cultural complexity that constitutes a distinct research context requiring its own conceptual and empirical treatment.

6. Conclusions, Implications and Limitations

6.1. Conclusions and Scholarly Contributions

This study identifies and theorises indigenous cultural competence as a strategically significant component of tourism human resource quality in community-based indigenous tourism destinations, using the mountainous areas

of Quang Ngai Province as its empirical grounding. Three principal scholarly contributions are made: the study is, to the authors' knowledge, the first to propose and describe a four-element structure of indigenous cultural competence in the context of Central Highlands and highland Quang Ngai multi-ethnic tourism; it provides qualitative mechanism-level explanation for the quantitative finding that accumulated education and experience has the largest direct effect on tourism human resource quality in the structural model; and it identifies the training–practice gap as a systemic condition, not an incidental failing, providing a substantive basis for training reform recommendations. The identification of intercultural conduct in multi-ethnic environments as a distinct competence sub-element constitutes an additional theoretical contribution relative to the existing international literature on indigenous tourism.

6.2. Practical Implications

For government authorities and occupational standards bodies. There is a compelling case for developing a parallel version of Vietnam's Tourism Occupational Standards specifically for community-based and indigenous tourism, incorporating indigenous cultural competence as a formally assessed component with context-specific performance criteria. Equally important is the establishment of a Recognition of Prior Learning mechanism that allows workers with deep indigenous knowledge to obtain formal occupational recognition independently of their formal educational credentials. This reform would address both the equity issue and the retention problem that the current system produces.

For tourism enterprises. Recruitment criteria should be recalibrated to reflect the actual competence requirements of highland indigenous tourism products, treating local cultural knowledge and community embeddedness as core selection criteria on par with formal qualifications. New employee orientation programmes should systematically integrate content on the ethnic cultures of the area, developed in collaboration with community knowledge-holders and compensating them appropriately. Career development frameworks should include indigenous cultural competence as a formally evaluated criterion for advancement, not as a supplementary consideration.

For training institutions. Curricula for tourism programmes serving highland Quang Ngai graduates should incorporate dedicated modules on the ethnic cultures of the region, combining classroom instruction with structured field learning at community tourism villages and cultural heritage sites. Formal institutional partnerships with indigenous communities should be developed to integrate elders and heritage-keepers as knowledge contributors to training programmes, with contractual arrangements that provide appropriate recognition and remuneration.

For workers. Workers with indigenous backgrounds should recognise their community knowledge and cultural embeddedness as constituting a durable occupational advantage that no amount of formal training can replicate in external applicants. Active investment in deepening indigenous knowledge - through community engagement, learning from elders and participation in cultural preservation activities - represents long-term human capital investment with returns specific to this tourism context.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Two principal limitations require acknowledgement. First, while the sample of 15 participants achieved information saturation, it does not support statistical generalisation; the findings should be interpreted as conceptual propositions requiring confirmatory quantitative testing rather than as empirically established facts about the broader population. Second, the research team's orientation toward the hypothesis that indigenous competence is systematically underrepresented in existing frameworks may have shaped interview question framing and analytic interpretation in ways that merit critical scrutiny.

Future research should develop a validated quantitative scale for indigenous cultural competence based on the four-element structure proposed here, subject the scale to exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, and integrate it into the structural model to test whether the construct improves explanatory power relative to the current five-component framework. Comparative multi-province research across the Central Highlands - covering the highland areas of Quang Ngai, Gia Lai, Đắk Lắk and Đắk Nông - would test the consistency of findings across contexts with similar multi-ethnic highland characteristics but different ethnic composition profiles and tourism development trajectories.

References

1. Baum T. Human resource management for tourism, hospitality and leisure: an international perspective. London: Thomson Learning; 2006.
2. Baum T. Human resources in tourism: still waiting for change? A 2015 reprise. *Tourism Manag.* 2015;50:204-212. doi:10.1016/j.tourman.2015.02.001.
3. Becker GS. Human capital: a theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1964.
4. Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qual Res Psychol.* 2006;3(2):77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.
5. Braun V, Clarke V. Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qual Res Sport Exerc Health.* 2019;11(4):589-597. doi:10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806.
6. Creswell JW, Poth CN. Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks (CA): SAGE; 2018.
7. Cross TL, Bazron BJ, Dennis KW, Isaacs MR. Towards a culturally competent system of care. Vol. 1. Washington (DC): Georgetown University Child Development Center; 1989.
8. Deardorff DK. Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *J Stud Int Educ.* 2006;10(3):241-266. doi:10.1177/1028315306287002.
9. Karatepe OM. High-performance work practices and hotel employee performance: the mediation of work engagement. *Int J Hosp Manag.* 2013;32:132-140. doi:10.1016/j.ijhm.2012.05.003.
10. Kusluvan S, Kusluvan Z, Ilhan I, Buyruk L. The human dimension: a review of human resources management issues in the tourism and hospitality industry. *Cornell Hosp Q.* 2010;51(2):171-214. doi:10.1177/1938965510362871.
11. Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Vietnam.

- Vietnam Tourism Occupational Standards (VTOS 2015). Hanoi: Statistical Publishing House; 2015.
12. Miles MB, Huberman AM, Saldaña J. Qualitative data analysis: a methods sourcebook. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks (CA): SAGE; 2014.
 13. People's Committee of Quang Ngai Province. Tourism development plan for Quang Ngai Province, 2021-2030, vision to 2050. Quang Ngai: People's Committee of Quang Ngai Province; 2022.
 14. Salazar NB. Community-based cultural tourism: issues, threats and opportunities. *J Sustain Tour*. 2012;20(1):9-22. doi:10.1080/09669582.2011.610969.
 15. Schultz TW. Investment in human capital. *Am Econ Rev*. 1961;51(1):1-17. doi:10.2307/1818907.
 16. Spencer LM, Spencer SM. Competence at work: models for superior performance. New York: Wiley; 1993.
 17. Tolkach D, King B. Strengthening community-based tourism in a new resource-based island nation. *Tourism Manag*. 2015;48:386-398. doi:10.1016/j.tourman.2014.12.013.
 18. UNWTO. Guidelines for the development of gastronomic tourism. Madrid: World Tourism Organization; 2019.
 19. Zeppel H. Indigenous ecotourism: sustainable development and management. Wallingford (UK): CABI; 2006.

How to Cite This Article

Tuan ND. Tourism human resource quality: a reflexive thematic analysis from the mountainous areas of Quang Ngai Province, Vietnam. *International Journal of Social Science Exceptional Research*. 2026;5(5):1-8. doi:10.54660/IJSSER.2026.5.5.01-08.

Creative Commons (CC) License

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BYNC-SA 4.0) License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.