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Nguyen Hung Anh
Vietnam National University of Agriculture, Hanoi, Vietnam

Truong Ngoc Tin
Vietnam National University of Agriculture, Hanoi, Vietnam

Do Ngoc Bich
Vietnam National University of Agriculture, Hanoi, Vietnam

Nguyen Thi Trang Nhung
Vietnam National University of Agriculture, Hanoi, Vietnam

Dang Xuan Phi
Vietnam National University of Agriculture, Hanoi, Vietnam

Nguyen Tat Thang
Vietnam National University of Agriculture, Hanoi, Vietnam

Ta Phuong Thuy
Vietnam National University of Agriculture, Hanoi, Vietnam

Nguyen Huyen Thuong
Vietnam National University of Agriculture, Hanoi, Vietnam

Corresponding Author:
Nguyen Hung Anh
Vietnam National University of Agriculture, Hanoi, Vietnam

Experiential ecotourism package design: Preferences and insights from Vietnam national university of agriculture

Nguyen Hung Anh, Truong Ngoc Tin, Do Ngoc Bich, Nguyen Thi Trang Nhung, Dang Xuan Phi, Nguyen Tat Thang, Ta Phuong Thuy and Nguyen Huyen Thuong

Abstract
This study examines university students' preferences for a proposed experiential ecotourism model at Vietnam National University of Agriculture (VNUA), utilizing a choice experiment (CE) design. The analysis focuses on how various service attributes influence decision-making and perceived institutional benefits. Based on a valid sample of 336 respondents, the findings reveal clear preferences for affordable transportation (e.g., shuttle carts, e-bikes), mid-level culinary offerings (3-4 specialty dishes per group), and interpretation by university students or faculty at points of interest within their disciplines. Popular experiential activities include beekeeping, mushroom cultivation, aquaculture, and pet care, highlighting the appeal of hands-on, knowledge-based tourism. Most respondents preferred daily tour prices under USD 12, with strong interest in science-branded souvenirs. The study also finds that such tourism experiences support broader institutional goals, including student recruitment, applied teaching, and campus branding. The insights suggest that structured, tiered ecotourism models can enhance both learning and outreach within higher education. The approach provides a horizontal scaling for universities seeking to integrate sustainability, education, and visitor engagement through campus-based tourism.

Keywords: Experiential ecotourism, on-campus tourism, VNUA

1. Introduction
Experiential ecotourism, defined as immersive, educational travel in natural settings, has garnered significant interest in higher education recently due to its potential to promote sustainability, civic engagement, and career readiness (Mak, Chloe, & Wong, 2017) [23]. As an educational strategy, it supports Kolb's experiential learning framework, whereby students learn through concrete experience, reflection, and active experimentation (Kolb, 2014) [20]. Students participating in structured ecotourism programs have demonstrated marked improvements in competencies such as teamwork, problem-solving, and prosocial behavior, and exhibit greater awareness of ecological and community responsibility when programs are intentionally designed to align with learning objectives (Mak *et al*., 2017) [23]. Moreover, such models often extend beyond academic goals to embrace community development, stakeholder collaboration, and regional sustainability, thus aligning with the concept of the "civic university" (Goddard, Hazelkorn, & Vallance, 2016) [14]. These civic-oriented institutions actively engage with their localities through applied education, reinforcing their role in shaping responsible, socially aware citizens.
While ecotourism is gaining popularity in primary and secondary education in Vietnam, evidence of partnerships between schools and nature reserves or heritage sites, the uptake in university education remains limited. Most current practices at the tertiary level involve field trips or volunteer activities that are sporadic, short-term, and often lack structured pedagogical objectives or institutional support (Tomasi, Paviotti, & Cavicchi, 2020) [35]. This underutilization stands in contrast to Vietnam's broader educational and policy goals, particularly its commitment to Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2020) [37]. In this context, there is a compelling need to systematically develop and integrate ecotourism-based experiential models within higher education institutions.
Vietnam National University of Agriculture (VNUA) offers a particularly fertile setting for this integration.

As the country's flagship institution in agriculture and rural development, VNUA inherits a vast, multifunctional green campus encompassing agricultural demonstration farms, aquaculture centers, community-oriented spaces, and scientific models. These facilities not only serve study and research purposes but also present untapped potential for building structured ecotourism packages that deliver educational, environmental, and social value. Furthermore, with diverse students across a wide range of scientific disciplines, VNUA can pilot interdisciplinary ecotourism experiences aligned with academic curricula and regional development strategies.

However, the successful design of such packages depends critically on understanding student preferences that include desired tour content, levels of interactivity, social dimensions, and perceived benefits. As prior research suggests, user-centered design significantly improves educational outcomes and satisfaction in experiential tourism (Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2010) [19]. Therefore, the study adopts a demand-driven approach to package development by collecting empirical data on VNUA students' preferences and expectations regarding various tour package attributes. Accordingly, the objectives of this research are the following:

- to examine the experiential ecotourism preferences of university students at VNUA;
- to assess the feasibility of developing a campus-based experiential ecotourism model;
- to provide strategic insights for scaling out options;

By aligning pedagogical goals with sustainability imperatives and student-centered motivation, this study contributes to the theoretical understanding and practical implementation of experiential ecotourism in higher education. Ultimately, it aims to position VNUA as a national leader in cultivating green competencies through immersive learning, while also fulfilling its civic responsibility to promote ecological consciousness.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Experiential Ecotourism in Vietnamese Higher Education

Since the mid-1990s, ecotourism (ET) has been a focal point of academic discourse and policy planning in Vietnam, primarily framed through the lenses of natural resource management and regional development. Foundational studies such as (Buckley, 1999; Le, 1999; Lipscombe & Thwaites, 2003; Pham, 1999) [8, 22, 31] established the conceptual and practical groundwork for ecotourism in protected areas. While these works provided valuable insights into the ecological and economic potential of ecotourism, they offered limited engagement with its pedagogical dimensions, particularly in higher education. The intersection of ecotourism and experiential learning within universities, where students may simultaneously act as learners, facilitators, and stewards of sustainability, remained largely underexplored.

Recent contributions have begun to bridge this gap by positioning on-campus ecotourism as a vehicle for experiential environmental education. (Nga, Tuyen, Hai, & Vinh, 2022) [26] proposed a 5.26-kilometer interpretive trail at Vietnam National University of Forestry, integrating biodiversity, environmental ethics, and academic inquiry into a structured educational route. With 97% of surveyed students supporting the initiative and 65% willing to serve as guides, the model demonstrates both feasibility and strong student interest. Similarly, (Tuan *et al*., 2019) [36] highlighted the potential of ecotourism in Thua Thien Hue as an educational tool to support cultural preservation and interdisciplinary learning. However, these initiatives remain localized and lack a systemic framework for curricular integration, cross-departmental collaboration, and longitudinal evaluation of learning outcomes.

Moreover, student-centered and community-based models have emphasized participatory approaches in ecotourism learning. For instance, (Hanh, Chinh, & Chi, 2022) [17] documented a "community-based learning tourism" model in Hoa Bac (Da Nang), wherein residents function as cultural educators. Meanwhile, (Ngo & Tran, 2019) [27] used logistic regression to examine student preferences, revealing that environmental concern, academic discipline, and perceived safety significantly influenced participation in ecotourism programs. Complementary studies by (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019) [28] demonstrated that digital technologies such as GIS and mobile apps can enrich learning experiences and broaden access to on-campus ecotourism. Collectively, these findings highlight the need for interdisciplinary, scalable, and participatory ecotourism models within Vietnamese higher education that not only foster environmental literacy but also contribute to broader sustainability competencies.

2.2 Package Tour Attributes for On-Campus Experiential Ecotourism Design

The design of experiential ecotourism packages, particularly in on-campus contexts, requires a nuanced understanding of tour attributes that align with sustainability goals, educational outcomes, and visitor engagement. International research on ecotourism product design has emphasized that effective package tours must be multidimensional, incorporating environmental interpretation, participatory learning, cultural immersion, and emotional engagement (Wearing & Neil, 2009; Weaver, 2001) [38, 39]. These components are especially critical in campus-based ecotourism settings, where students are tourists and learners. First, core tour attributes widely cited in ecotourism literature include interpretive quality, guide competence, environmental setting, accessibility, safety, group size, and authenticity (Ardoin, Wheaton, Bowers, Hunt, & Durham, 2015; Ballantyne & Packer, 2005; Moscardo, 1996) [1, 3, 25]. High-quality interpretation, delivered through either human guides or interpretive signage, enhances ecological literacy and memory retention. The importance of trained guides as facilitators of cognitive and affective learning is also strongly emphasized (Black & Weiler, 2005; Orams, 1997; Powell & Ham, 2008) [6, 29, 32]. In campus environments, student or faculty guides with subject-matter expertise can enhance both peer learning and place attachment (Zeppel & Muloin, 2008) [42]. Second, tour duration and sequencing are additional design attributes influencing satisfaction and learning (Cole, 2006) [10]. Short-form campus tours (1-3 hours) are more suitable for structured educational integration, while modular designs (e.g., optional "theme stations") increase flexibility (Brochu & Merriman, 2002) [7]. Furthermore, participatory elements such as ecological data collection, trail maintenance, or habitat monitoring encourage experiential engagement and improve knowledge retention (Ballantyne, Packer, & Falk, 2011; Falk, 2005) [2, 11]. Third, price sensitivity is less relevant in campus-based ecotourism but is still linked to perceived value. Rather than focusing on monetary costs, studies emphasize cognitive and psychological value, including self-development,

novelty, and social bonding (Kastenholz, João, Peixeira, & and Loureiro, 2018) [18]. These align closely with experiential education goals, where emotional outcomes such as wonder, empathy, or a sense of responsibility are key factors. Fourth, customization and modularity have emerged as dominant themes in ecotourism package design. Therefore, allowing tourists to co-create their experience enhances satisfaction and recall. In campus settings, this translates to providing multiple thematic pathways (e.g., biodiversity, sustainability, cultural heritage) tailored to different academic disciplines. At last, sustainability considerations such as low-impact transportation, waste minimization, and habitat protection are foundational in ecotourism package design. On-campus ecotourism must model environmentally responsible practices, both to reduce the footprint and to educate students as future sustainability leaders (Robbins, Robbins, & Frailey).

Existing literature underscores that successful on-campus experiential ecotourism packages must be learner-centered, flexible, interpretively rich, and environmentally sound. Tour attributes such as quality interpretation, guided engagement, participatory components, and modular design are central to creating impactful ecotourism experiences within academic institutions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Choice Experiment

This study employs a Choice Experiment (CE) methodology to assess university students' preferences for key attributes of on-campus experiential ecotourism packages. CE is grounded in Lancaster's theory of consumer choice, which posits that utility is derived from the attributes of a good rather than the good itself (Fernández Castro & Smith, 2002) [13], and it is operationalized using random utility theory (McFadden, 1974) [24]. The CE method enables the estimation of marginal willingness to pay (WTP) for individual attributes and the trade-offs that respondents are willing to make between them. Attributes and attribute levels were developed through a multi-stage process, including a review of relevant literature, key informant interviews, and stakeholder consultations. Initial attribute selection was guided by previous CE studies in ecotourism contexts (Chaminuka, Groeneveld, Selomane, & Ierland, 2012) [9], focusing on factors typically influencing tour package decisions. To ensure contextual relevance, in-depth consultations were conducted with three main stakeholder groups:

- Tour operators collaborating with the Vietnam National University of Agriculture (VNUA) on campus tourism initiatives;
- Experts from the Vietnam National Authority of Tourism and the Institute for Tourism Development Research (ITDR);
- VNUA faculty members are involved in planning and managing on-campus experiential ecotourism activities.

Based on these consultations, nine core attributes were finalized, each with 4 to 7 levels, including: points of interest; tour package information; transportation; lodging; on-campus culinary; tour guiding and interpretation; experiential activities; souvenirs; and pricing options.

3.2 Data and Sample

Before engaging in the choice experiment (CE) tasks, participants were provided with clear definitions and illustrative examples of all attributes and their corresponding levels to minimize hypothetical bias and ensure informed decision-making. A total of 350 undergraduate students were invited to participate in the survey; however, after data cleaning and screening for incomplete or inconsistent responses, 336 valid observations were retained for analysis. Each respondent was presented with a series of choice sets, in which three alternative experiential ecotourism packages were labeled Model A (Ecological Sightseeing Tourism), Model B (Experiential Ecotourism for Learning), and Model C (Ecological Discovery Tourism with Environmental Interpretation). Table A1 (Appendix) summarizes the differences aligned with experiential learning, environmental interpretation, and sustainable campus tourism among the three experiential ecotourism models.

Respondents were instructed to choose the most preferred option in each set, based on trade-offs among attributes such as price, activities, accommodation type, and souvenirs. To gain preliminary insights into the behavioral tendencies and preference patterns of potential consumers, descriptive statistical methods were employed. These included measures of central tendency (e.g., means), frequency distributions (percentages), and relevant inferential statistical tests such as the t-test and z-test, where applicable. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the survey sample.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the survey sample

Categories		Model(A)	Model(B)	Model(C)	Chi-square
Age	<18	27 (0.080)	26 (0.077)	25 (0.074)	0.693
	≥18	78 (0.232)	86 (0.256)	94 (0.280)	
Gender	Male	37 (0.110)	43 (0.128)	49 (0.146)	0.831
	Female	68 (0.202)	69 (0.205)	70 (0.208)	
Income	Level 1	78 (0.232)	76 (0.226)	78 (0.232)	3.557
	Level 2	8 (0.024)	6 (0.018)	10 (0.030)	
	Level 3	19 (0.057)	30 (0.089)	31 (0.092)	
Place of origin	Rural	81 (0.241)	86 (0.256)	93 (0.277)	0.066
	Urban	24 (0.071)	26 (0.077)	26 (0.077)	
Traveling mode	with Others	94 (0.280)	103 (0.307)	107 (0.318)	0.441
	Solo	11 (0.033)	9 (0.027)	12 (0.036)	
Annual travel frequency	>3 times	6 (0.018)	13 (0.039)	14 (0.042)	14.28*
	1 time	62 (0.185)	56 (0.167)	57 (0.170)	
	2 times	14 (0.042)	28 (0.083)	23 (0.068)	
	3 times	4 (0.012)	6 (0.018)	10 (0.030)	
	None	19 (0.057)	9 (0.027)	15 (0.045)	

Note: Results are based on two-sided tests (z-test). For each significant pair, the key of the category with the smaller column proportion appears in the category with the larger column proportion. Significance level for upper case letters (A, B, C):.05. Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3 denote <120 USD/month, 120-200 USD/month, and >200 USD/month. *. The Chi-square statistic is significant at the.05 level

Source: Survey 2024

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Points of Interest

VNUA (Vietnam National University of Agriculture) offers a wide array of planned destinations that support on-campus experiential ecotourism activities. These include the Veterinary Hospital, the Plant Hospital, the Center for Tropical Bee Research and Apiculture, the Lotus Germplasm Research and Conservation Center, the Institute for the Development of Edible and Medicinal Mushrooms, the Institute of Agricultural Biology, the Institute of Ornamental Biology, the Botanical Garden, VNUA Pharma, and key academic units such as the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Faculty of Animal Science, Faculty of Aquaculture, and Faculty of Agronomy. These sites not only serve as ecotourism attractions but also function as vital academic and research facilities that support teaching, experiential learning, and scientific research for faculty, staff, and students. The coexistence of educational infrastructure and ecological resources represents a major advantage in developing integrated experiential ecotourism models within the university setting. This dual-purpose framework provides a unique foundation for designing innovative programs that combine environmental education, research engagement, and sustainable tourism practices.

According to Table 2, Model C, which includes the highest number of POIs (with 37 participants preferring three destinations), recorded the highest overall selection rate (26.8%), slightly ahead of Model B (25.6%) and Model A (22.6%). Although the chi-square test for "impact on visitor decision" is not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 0.600$, $p>0.05$), the variable "number of POIs" shows a statistically significant distribution ($\chi^2 = 11.925$, $p<0.05$), suggesting that the diversity and quantity of POIs significantly influence visitor choice behavior. Additionally, Model C also obtained the highest mean score for the perceived importance of POIs (M = 3.8, SD = 1.045), which was statistically higher than Model A (M = 3.2, SD = 1.045), based on t-test results at the 0.05 level. This result supports previous findings from (Ballantyne & and Packer, 2011) [2], who emphasized that ecotourism packages with multiple, thematically diverse destinations significantly enhance educational and emotional engagement among participants. Similarly, studies by (Falk, Moussouri, & Coulson, 1998) [12] highlight the importance of multisite exposure in promoting deeper ecological learning and interpretive satisfaction.

Table 2: Points of interest (POI)

Categories		Model(A)	Model(B)	Model(C)	Chi-square
Impact on visitor decision		76 (0.226)	86 (0.256)	90 (0.268)	0.600
No. of PoI	smaller than 3	24 (0.071)	15 (0.045)	19 (0.057)	11.925
	more than 5	19 (0.057)	24 (0.071)	32 (0.095)	
	3	33 (0.098)	32 (0.095)	37 (0.110)	
	4	22 (0.065)	23 (0.068)	23 (0.068)	
	5	7 (0.021)	18 (0.054)	8 (0.024)	
Importance level of POI[a]		3.2 (1.045)	3.5 (1.064)	3.8 (1.045) [A]	

Note: Results are based on two-sided tests (t-test assuming equal variances and z-test). For each significant pair, the key of the category with the smaller column proportion appears in the category with the larger column proportion. Significance level for upper case letters (A, B, C):.05 level. *. The Chi-square statistic is significant at the.05 level. Figures within the parentheses are percentages computed for the total sample (Table N%). a. Computed mean with Std. Deviation within the parentheses.
Source: Survey 2024

4.2 Tour Parkage Communication

Table 3 highlights that the overall impact of communication on decision-making was statistically similar across models ($p>0.05$), and significant variation emerged in specific channels. Communication via social media stood out with a significant chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 14.23$, $p<0.05$), with Model C receiving the highest response rate (16.7%) compared to Model B (11.9%) and Model A (7.1%). This suggests that interactive platforms, particularly social media, play a critical role in influencing student interest in ecotourism models.

In contrast, traditional methods such as brochures and university websites did not significantly affect choices, indicating their limited impact. Model C also scored highest on the perceived importance of communication (Mean = 3.7), significantly higher than Model A (Mean = 3.3), further reinforcing the effectiveness of digital engagement. These findings are consistent with (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) [41], who highlight the growing influence of digital and social media in destination marketing, especially among younger audiences. Therefore, effective communication strategies for campus-based experiential ecotourism should prioritize social media to enhance reach, engagement, and behavioral conversion.

Table 3: Tour parkage communication (TPC)

Categories	Model(A)	Model(B)	Model(C)	Chi-square
Impact on visitor decision	87 (0.259)	93 (0.277)	98 (0.292)	0.020
Through the university website	54 (0.161)	62 (0.185)	55 (0.164)	1.946
Through social networks	41 (0.122)	42 (0.125)	45 (0.134)	0.061
By a hands-on brochure	13 (0.039)	13 (0.039)	13 (0.039)	0.115
Through social media	24 (0.071)	40 (0.119)	56 (0.167) [A]	14.23*
Importance level of TPC[a]	3.3 (1.148)	3.5 (1.154)	3.7 (1.113) [A]	

Note: Results are based on two-sided tests (t-test assuming equal variances and z-test). For each significant pair, the key of the category with the smaller column proportion appears in the category with the larger column proportion. Significance level for upper case letters (A, B, C):.05 level. *. The Chi-square statistic is significant at the.05 level. Figures within the parentheses are percentages computed for the total sample (Table N%). a. Computed mean with Std. Deviation within the parentheses.
Source: Survey 2024

4.3 Campus Transportation

Table 4 examines the impact of various on-campus transportation options on participants' preferences for the proposed ecotourism models. Although the overall effect of transportation on visitor decisions is only marginally significant (χ^2 = 4.920, p>0.05), the breakdown by transport mode reveals notable trends. The campus shuttle cart, a university-operated, fee-based service, was the most preferred option across all models, especially in Model B (13.7%), indicating a general preference for organized and convenient transport.

Table 4: On-campus transportation options

Categories	Model(A)	Model(B)	Model(C)	Chi-square
Impact on visitors' decision	85 (0.253)	102 (0.304)	99 (0.295)	4.920
Walking/hiking	12 (0.036)	19 (0.057)	12 (0.036)	
Tour operator's vehicle service	19 (0.057)	17 (0.051)	27 (0.080)	
E-bike rental service (3rd party fee-based)	17 (0.051)	12 (0.036)	21 (0.063)	10.222
E-scooter/motorbike (3rd party fee-based)	25 (0.074)	18 (0.054)	22 (0.065)	
Campus shuttle cart (uni fee-based)	32 (0.095)	46 (0.137)	37 (0.110)	
Importance level of transportation[a]	3.4 (1.295)	3.5 (1.266)	3.6 (1.170)	

Note: Results are based on two-sided tests (t-test assuming equal variances and z-test). For each significant pair, the key of the category with the smaller column proportion appears in the category with the larger column proportion. Significance level for upper case letters (A, B, C):.05 level. *. The Chi-square statistic is significant at the.05 level. Figures within the parentheses are percentages computed for the total sample (Table N%). a. Computed mean with Std. Deviation within the parentheses.
Source: Survey 2024

A significant variation is observed in the use of walking/hiking (χ^2 = 10.222, p<0.05), which had low overall uptake, suggesting that while sustainable, it may not be practical for longer or multi-stop itineraries. Meanwhile, third-party, fee-based options, such as electric bike and scooter rentals, showed moderate but consistent appeal, especially in Model C. This reflects the increasing acceptance of micro-mobility solutions in ecotourism settings. Model C also scored the highest in perceived importance of transportation (Mean = 3.6), suggesting that convenience, flexibility, and accessibility play critical roles in shaping visitor preferences. These findings align with previous tourism mobility studies, which emphasize the importance of multi-modal and low-emission transport in enhancing the quality and sustainability of tourist experiences (Page, 2011) [30].

4.4 Campus Accommodation

Table 5 presents that the overall influence of accommodation options (R&R) on visitor decision-making is not statistically significant (χ^2 = 0.757, p>0.05). The distribution of specific choices reveals meaningful patterns.

Table 5: On-campus rest and refresh (R&R) options

Categories	Model(A)	Model(B)	Model(C)	Chi-square
Impact on visitors' decision	85 (0.253)	91 (0.271)	101 (0.301)	0.757
Day trip (without lodging)	4 (0.012)	2 (0.006)	4 (0.012)	
POI visitor rest area	34 (0.101)	42 (0.125)	39 (0.116)	
Lunch-time rest area	38 (0.113)	40 (0.119)	50 (0.149)	3.458
2-star lodging (on-campus hotel)	9 (0.027)	11 (0.033)	8 (0.024)	
3-star lodging (on-campus hotel)	20 (0.060)	17 (0.051)	18 (0.054)	
Importance level of R&R[a]	3.4 (1.231)	3.7 (1.165)	3.7 (1.085)	

Note: Results are based on two-sided tests (t-test assuming equal variances and z-test). For each significant pair, the key of the category with the smaller column proportion appears in the category with the larger column proportion. Significance level for upper case letters (A, B, C):.05 level. *. The Chi-square statistic is significant at the.05 level. Figures within the parentheses are percentages computed for the total sample (Table N%). a. Computed mean with Std. Deviation within the parentheses.
Source: Survey 2024

Lunch-time rest areas, informal stopovers during midday, such as faculty ballrooms or shaded gardens, were the most preferred R&R option, especially in Model C (14.9%). This indicates a strong preference for integrated, non-lodging rest points within the tour route. Similarly, POI visitor rest areas (e.g., interpretive centers or green pavilions) also received notable support, reinforcing the value of short-format, place-based breaks during tours. In contrast, lodging options (2-star or 3-star on-campus hotels) were less frequently chosen, suggesting that most visitors perceive the ecotourism activity as a day trip or non-overnight excursion. This is consistent with ecotourism literature emphasizing low-impact infrastructure and day-use facilities in educational tourism environments (Wearing & Neil, 2009) [38]. Importantly, the perceived importance of R&R was highest in Models B and C (Mean = 3.7), indicating that while overnight stays may be secondary, access to comfortable, accessible rest areas during tours significantly enhances visitor satisfaction and tour quality.

4.5 Campus Catering Services

The overall impact of culinary offerings on visitor decisions is not statistically significant (χ^2 = 0.731, p>0.05), but individual food service formats show marked differences (Table 6). Notably, fast meals per person were most preferred in Model A (9.5%), significantly more than in Models B and C (both 5.7%), as indicated by the chi-square value (χ^2 = 20.704, p<0.05). This suggests that a portion of visitors value convenience and speed in their dining experience. In contrast, respondents in Model C most favored (11.3%) group-based specialty cuisine experiences (3-4 dishes for a group of six), which is higher than Model

A (5.4%), indicating demand for shared, immersive gastronomic experiences. Model C also had the highest mean score for perceived importance of culinary options (M = 3.8), implying that richer, more diverse food experiences enhance overall satisfaction. These results align with previous ecotourism studies emphasizing the role of local cuisine as a cultural and sensory enrichment factor (Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016) [5]. Offering customizable, locally themed group meals may therefore improve both the educational and experiential dimensions of on-campus ecotourism.

Table 6: On-campus culinary options (CO) for tourists

Categories	Model1(A)	Model2(B)	Model3(C)	Chi-square
Impact on visitors' decision	91 (0.271)	97 (0.289)	99 (0.295)	0.731
Fast meal/person	32 (0.095) C	19 (0.057)	19 (0.057)	20.704
2-3 special cuisines/group (6 persons)	13 (0.039)	19 (0.057)	16 (0.048)	
3-4 special cuisines/group (6 persons)	18 (0.054)	29 (0.086)	38 (0.113) A	
4-5 special cuisines/group (6 persons)	23 (0.068)	31 (0.092)	18 (0.054)	
> 5 special cuisines/group (6 persons)	19 (0.057)	14 (0.042)	28 (0.083)	
Importance level of CO[a]	3.6 (1.224)	3.7 (1.248)	3.8 (1.166)	

Note: Results are based on two-sided tests (t-test assuming equal variances and z-test). For each significant pair, the key of the category with the smaller column proportion appears in the category with the larger column proportion. Significance level for upper case letters (A, B, C):.05 level. *. The Chi-square statistic is significant at the.05 level. Figures within the parentheses are percentages computed for the total sample (Table N%). a. Computed mean with Std. Deviation within the parentheses.
Source: Survey 2024

4.6 Tour Guiding and Interpretation

Tour guiding and interpretation (TGI) are essential components in enhancing the quality and educational value of ecotourism experiences, particularly in academic environments such as university campuses. Table 7 presents the distribution of visitor preferences for different guiding models across three proposed ecotourism packages at VNUA. Although the overall effect of TGI on visitor decision-making was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 0.636$, $p>0.05$), disaggregated results reveal notable behavioral trends.

Table 7: Tour guiding and interpretation (TGI)

Categories		Model(A)	Model(B)	Model(C)	Chi-square
Impact on visitors' decision		88 (0.262)	98 (0.292)	101 (0.301)	0.636
By whom?	Public relations office	4 (0.012)	7 (0.021)	17 (0.051) A	12.555
	University liaison office	6 (0.018)	5 (0.015)	9 (0.027)	
	Faculty staff of POI	33 (0.098)	38 (0.113)	35 (0.104)	
	Tour guide (uni student)	22 (0.065)	29 (0.086)	22 (0.065)	
	On-site guide (uni student)	40 (0.119)	33 (0.098)	36 (0.107)	
Importance level of TGI[a]		3.5 (1.287)	3.7 (1.188)	3.8 (1.162)	

Note: Results are based on two-sided tests (t-test assuming equal variances and z-test). For each significant pair, the key of the category with the smaller column proportion appears in the category with the larger column proportion. Significance level for upper case letters (A, B, C):.05 level. *. The Chi-square statistic is significant at the.05 level. Figures within the parentheses are percentages computed for the total sample (Table N%). a. Computed mean with Std. Deviation within the parentheses.
Source: Survey 2024

Faculty staff at points of interest (POIs) emerged as the most preferred guiding source across all models, especially in Model B (11.3%). This reflects a strong visitor inclination toward authoritative, content-rich interpretation, reinforcing the educational function of on-campus ecotourism. Interestingly, a statistically significant difference was found in the preference for public relations (PR) office staff ($\chi^2 = 12.555$, $p<0.05$), with Model C attracting the highest proportion (5.1%). This may suggest that visitors associate formal institutional representation with professionalism and branding clarity in more polished tour formats.

Student-led guiding, both as tour guides and on-site interpreters, maintained consistent support across models, suggesting that peer engagement remains an effective and relatable approach in ecotourism delivery. Model C again achieved the highest average score for perceived importance of TGI (Mean = 3.8), underscoring the critical role of interpretive services in shaping visitor satisfaction and learning outcomes. These findings support a hybrid interpretation model that combines academic authority with student-led interaction, aligning with previous research emphasizing the dual importance of expertise and relatability in sustainable tourism experiences (Wise, 2017) [40].

4.7 Experiential Activities

With a wide array of attractions spanning diverse scientific disciplines, the experiential activities offered on the VNUA campus promise to stimulate both excitement and curiosity among visitors. These activities are designed not only for entertainment but also for immersive learning, connecting participants directly with the university's applied research and training environments. Highlights include: the "A Day as a Farmer" program at the Faculty of Agronomy, where visitors engage in seasonal crop activities; "Honey Harvesting and Beekeeping Practices" at the Center for Bee Research and Tropical Apiculture; and "Pet Spa and Grooming Experience" at the Institute of Ornamental Plants and Pet Biotechnology. At the Institute for Research and Development of Edible and Medicinal Mushrooms, guests can participate in "Mushroom Cultivation and Harvesting", offering hands-on insight into fungal biotechnology.

Meanwhile, the Veterinary Hospital introduces interactive learning through "Training, Pet Hotels, and Veterinary Care Demonstrations". The Faculty of Aquaculture offers access to "Advanced Hatchery, Artificial Reproduction, and High-Tech Aquaculture Models", allowing visitors to explore cutting-edge aquatic innovations. Finally, the Center for Research and Development of Lotus Germplasm Resources provides a tranquil setting for "Lotus Picking and Traditional Fishing", blending ecological heritage with recreational discovery. These interdisciplinary experiences form the foundation for a uniquely academic and ecologically rich tourism model, where education, innovation, and sustainable leisure intersect.

Table 8 presents visitor preferences regarding organized experiential activities (OEAs). Among the seven activity categories, mycological experiences (e.g., mushroom cultivation) ranked highest in Model C (15.2%), followed closely by apicultural (14.9%) and post-harvest handling (15.5%) activities. These preferences reflect a strong interest in hands-on, science-based learning, particularly sustainable agriculture and food systems. Aquaculture activities also gained prominence in Model C (14.0%), suggesting that visitors are drawn to high-tech, research-oriented experiences. Also, Model C recorded the highest perceived importance of OEAs (Mean = 3.8), reinforcing the notion that diversity and integration of activities contribute to visitor satisfaction. Although veterinary and animal science activities were somewhat less preferred, they still formed an essential part of the multidisciplinary appeal.

These results align with experiential learning theories (Kolb, 2014) and tourism literature, highlighting the importance of immersive, thematic programming in university ecotourism. Designing tours that combine educational depth with interactive engagement can significantly enhance the perceived value of the visitor experience.

Table 8: Organized experiential activities (OEA)

Categories		Model(A)	Model(B)	Model(C)	Chi-square
Impact on visitors' decision		88 (0.262)	100 (0.298)	101 (0.301)	1.549
Experiential activities	Agricultural	33 (0.098)	40 (0.119)	42 (0.125)	0.536
	Apicultural	40 (0.119)	45 (0.134)	50 (0.149)	0.357
	Animal science	37 (0.110)	49 (0.146)	48 (0.143)	1.654
	Mycological	38 (0.113)	45 (0.134)	51 (0.152)	1.040
	Veterinary	28 (0.083)	40 (0.119)	39 (0.116)	2.117
	Aquaculture	32 (0.095)	37 (0.110)	47 (0.140)	2.172
	Post-harvest	39 (0.116)	50 (0.149)	52 (0.155)	1.479
Importance level of OEA[a]		3.5 (1.323)	3.6 (1.280)	3.8 (1.273)	

Note: Results are based on two-sided tests (t-test assuming equal variances and z-test). For each significant pair, the key of the category with the smaller column proportion appears in the category with the larger column proportion. Significance level for upper case letters (A, B, C):.05 level. *. The Chi-square statistic is significant at the.05 level. Figures within the parentheses are percentages computed for the total sample (Table N%). a. Computed mean with Std. Deviation within the parentheses.
Source: Survey 2024

4.8 Gift Options

Souvenir products (SP) contribute not only to tourists' memory retention but also to destination branding and local economic sustainability. Science and technology-based products (e.g., research outputs, functional items derived from labs) were the most preferred across all models, especially in Model C (21.7%), suggesting visitors' interest in unique, knowledge-driven souvenirs with the academic identity of the institution (Table 9). This aligns with previous studies emphasizing the demand for "experiential authenticity" and meaningful souvenirs (Swanson & Timothy, 2012) [34].

Table 9: Souvenir products (SP)

Categories	Model(A)	Model(B)	Model(C)	Chi-square
Impact on visitors' decision	78 (0.232)	82 (0.244)	93 (0.277)	0.840
University branding gifts	40 (0.119)	49 (0.146)	37 (0.110)	3.967
POI branding gifts	34 (0.101)	51 (0.152)	42 (0.125)	4.480
Science & technology products	49 (0.146)	65 (0.193)	73 (0.217)	5.255
Scientific publication	15 (0.045)	20 (0.060)	22 (0.065)	0.794
Postcards and Apparel	38 (0.113)	45 (0.134)	49 (0.146)	0.638
Importance level of SP[a]	3.4 (1.277)	3.5 (1.245)	3.7 (1.215)	

Note: Results are based on two-sided tests (t-test assuming equal variances and z-test). For each significant pair, the key of the category with the smaller column proportion appears in the category with the larger column proportion. Significance level for upper case letters (A, B, C):.05 level. *. The Chi-square statistic is significant at the.05 level. Figures within the parentheses are percentages computed for the total sample (Table N%). a. Computed mean with Std. Deviation within the parentheses.
Source: Survey 2024

POI-branded gifts (e.g., items representing specific faculties or research centers) ranked second in popularity, particularly in Model B (15.2%), indicating the appeal of localized and site-specific memorabilia. Traditional items such as postcards and apparel also showed stable interest but were less distinctive in driving tour differentiation. Model C recorded the highest perceived importance of SPs (M = 3.7), reinforcing the role of souvenir design in enhancing post-visit recall, educational value, and emotional attachment to the tour experience.

4.9 Pricing Options

Understanding visitor willingness to pay is crucial in designing sustainable and inclusive ecotourism packages.

The USD 4 per person/day option was consistently the most preferred, especially in Model A (14.6%), suggesting that affordability remains a critical driver of participation, particularly among student populations. This finding aligns with (Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004) [16], who noted that lower-income groups often prioritize basic access over added-value services in tourism contexts. However, interest in mid-range prices (USD 8-12) grew notably in Model B and Model C. For instance, Model C attracted 11.3% at the USD 8 tier and 8.9% at USD 12, indicating a segment willing to pay more for enhanced experiences, possibly due to perceived increases in service quality or educational value. Higher price points (USD 16-20) were the least favored across all models, confirming high price elasticity in this demographic. A multi-tiered pricing strategy may therefore be optimal, balancing accessibility with revenue generation through differentiated service levels.

Table 10: Pricing options

Categories		Model(A)	Model(B)	Model(C)	Chi-square
Tour price person/day	4USD	49 (0.146)	42 (0.125)	39 (0.116)	10.932
	8USD	34 (0.101)	31 (0.092)	38 (0.113)	
	12USD	14 (0.042)	28 (0.083)	30 (0.089)	
	16USD	4 (0.012)	8 (0.024)	5 (0.015)	
	20USD	4 (0.012)	3 (0.009)	7 (0.021)	

Note: Results are based on two-sided tests (z-test). For each significant pair, the key of the category with the smaller column proportion appears in the category with the larger column proportion. Significance level for upper case letters (A, B, C):.05. *. The Chi-square statistic is significant at the.05 level.
Source: Survey 2024

4.10 Benefits of Ecotourism Experiential Models for Universities

Ecotourism experiential models offer universities valuable opportunities to enhance student learning through practical, hands-on experiences that deepen understanding of sustainability and conservation. Ultimately, integrating ecotourism experiences helps universities instill sustainability values in students, preparing them to become future leaders dedicated to environmental stewardship. VNUA stands to gain a range of strategic benefits from implementing on-campus ecotourism models, as illustrated in Table 11. The most prominent benefit was career guidance in student admissions, which peaked in Model C (18.8%). This suggests that experiential ecotourism can act as an informal recruitment channel, allowing prospective students and their families to become acquainted with academic programs and campus life through engaging, hands-on interactions. Similarly, career-oriented teaching and training were notably emphasized in Model B (15.2%), indicating that such tourism models can support practical pedagogy and skills-based instruction, consistent with applied education frameworks (Kolb, 2014) [20].

Another widely acknowledged benefit was the potential to enhance awareness and perception of the university, with Model C again receiving the highest proportion (17.9%). This aligns with literature emphasizing the branding function of experiential outreach (Govers & Go, 2016) [15]. Less frequently cited, but still meaningful, were income improvement and internal resource utilization, underscoring secondary financial and operational gains. Together, these findings affirm that well-designed experiential ecotourism initiatives can serve as multifunctional platforms, enhancing institutional visibility, pedagogical relevance, and strategic outreach.

Table 11: Benefits for Universities

Categories	Model(A)	Model(B)	Model(C)	Chi-square
University branding promotion	55 (0.164)	60 (0.179)	55 (0.164)	1.443
Career guidance in student admission	44 (0.131)	50 (0.149)	63 (0.188)	3.022
Career-oriented teaching and training	32 (0.095)	51 (0.152)	47 (0.140)	5.232
Income improvement & job opportunities	34 (0.101)	39 (0.116)	40 (0.119)	0.145
Enhance awareness & perception	46 (0.137)	51 (0.152)	60 (0.179)	1.075
University resource efficiency	32 (0.095)	39 (0.116)	47 (0.140)	1.998

Note: Results are based on two-sided tests (z-test). For each significant pair, the key of the category with the smaller column proportion appears in the category with the larger column proportion. Significance level for upper case letters (A, B, C):.05. *. The Chi-square statistic is significant at the.05 level.
Source: Survey 2024

5. Conclusion

The study examined university students' preferences toward the design and delivery of on-campus experiential ecotourism packages, employing a choice experiment (CE) method integrated with descriptive statistics. Drawing on data from 336 valid respondents, the findings indicate valuable patterns in behavioral preferences and suggest practical implications for designing an education-oriented ecotourism model within the context of a multidisciplinary university like the Vietnam National University of Agriculture (VNUA).

Firstly, the analysis shows that tour communication, particularly through digital platforms such as social media and university websites, significantly influences decision-making. This reflects broader shifts in youth travel behavior, where information accessibility and online interaction shape perception and expectations. Effective communication strategies should thus prioritize digital storytelling, branding, and interactive content that showcase real campus experiences. Secondly, transportation, rest and refresh facilities, and culinary services emerge as critical infrastructure variables. Respondents demonstrated clear

preferences for accessible, affordable, and eco-friendly transportation options such as university shuttle carts and third-party e-bikes. Similarly, demand for rest areas during lunch hours or between activities points to the importance of integrating flexible, shaded, and well-maintained break zones at points of interest (POIs). Culinary preferences, interestingly, leaned toward small group-based, thematic local cuisine experiences, suggesting that food is not only a functional need but also a central cultural and sensory dimension of ecotourism. Third, the analysis of guiding and interpretation services confirmed that faculty members and university students serving as on-site guides were preferred over professional or administrative staff. This reflects a dual function of the tourism model, serving both as a learning opportunity for students and as a way to convey authentic, discipline-specific knowledge to visitors. It reinforces the model's alignment with experiential learning theory, and its pedagogical potential for skill development and communication training. Additionally, organized experiential activities such as mushroom harvesting, apiculture, aquaculture, veterinary services, and postharvest demonstrations were consistently rated highly. These offerings reflect the university's strength in applied science and reinforce the importance of multidisciplinary and sensory-rich programming in experiential tourism. They also hold potential for commercialization through tourism-linked curriculum modules or student-led service startups. Souvenir preferences leaned toward science and technology-based items and localized branding products, indicating a desire for memorabilia that is both meaningful and unique to the institutional identity. Pricing results show that the majority of participants prefer low to moderately priced packages (USD 4-12/day), yet a notable share showed willingness to pay more for enriched, quality-driven experiences, supporting the design of tiered service bundles. Importantly, respondents acknowledged multiple institutional benefits from implementing such a model, including student recruitment, teaching enrichment, income generation, and resource utilization. The findings support the case for integrating ecotourism into VNUA's broader strategy for community engagement, educational innovation, and university branding.

To summarize, this research confirms the viability and strategic value of on-campus experiential ecotourism. It offers actionable insights into package design that align with youth preferences and institutional goals. Further studies may expand this work by conducting long-term pilot implementations, analyzing learning outcomes, and exploring partnerships with external stakeholders.

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Appendix

A1: Comparative analysis of the experiential ecotourism model in a university campus

Categories	Model A	Model B	Model C
Purpose	To showcase the green landscape and promote its image as an open, park-like agricultural campus for relaxation and visualization	To offer hands-on, experiential learning aligned with formal education through agricultural and environmental practice.	To create an immersive journey that combines ecological and cultural storytelling, enhancing environmental awareness and personal reflection.
Content	Passive activities as touring botanical gardens, lakes, and scenic green spaces, photography, and leisure walks.	Active participation in agricultural models (e.g., crop planting, aquaculture), biotechnology labs, and sustainability practices.	Thematic guided tours with narrative elements; visitors interact with farming traditions, symbolic flora, and conservation models.
Benefits	Mental relaxation, informal environmental awareness, and enhanced campus visibility to the broader public.	Deepened environmental literacy, improved practical skills, and greater interest in agri-food careers among students and youth.	Strengthened ecological consciousness through emotional and intellectual engagement; fosters long-term pro-environmental attitudes.
Visitor Experience	Easy to access; suitable for all ages; primarily observational and recreational.	Immersive and transformative, visitors perform tasks as "student farmers" and "citizen scientists."	Sensory-rich exploration guided by interpreters; visitors are prompted to reflect, connect, and engage meaningfully with their surroundings.
Memories Created	Photographic memories of tranquil scenery and the university's natural beauty.	Personal accomplishments, such as planting a tree or harvesting vegetables, are practical souvenirs of learning.	A lasting emotional connection through interpretive storytelling and cultural-ecological immersion.

Source: Survey 2024