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Beyond the Classroom: Stakeholder Collaboration Framework for Sustainable Educational Tourism

Tian Wanqing[a], Chia Kei Wei[a,b]

[a]School of Hospitality, Tourism, & Events, Faculty of Social Sciences & Leisure Management, Taylor's University, Subang Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia, [b]Sustainable Impact Lab, Taylor's University, Subang Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

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Abstract

Study tours are a subset of educational tourism and are growing rapidly in many countries. However, the supply-side coordination of educational tourism remains fragmented. Using a case study of Luoyang City, Henan Province, China, we explore the sustainable development of the study tour industry through a qualitative lens. Fourteen institutional stakeholders (i.e., government officials, school administrators, travel operators, and cultural heritage representatives) were purposively sampled and surveyed using semi-structured interviews. The results showed that successful educational tourism involves a student-centred system that coordinates government, integrates resource sharing and maintains constant communication among the stakeholders. Finally, the proposed framework offers a systems-based guide for coordinating these public, private, academic, and cultural actors.

Keywords: Study Tours, Educational Tourism, Supply-Side, Stakeholders

Introduction

Educational tourism is a form of experiential learning program that involves education and travel (Arcodia et al., 2021). Previous studies have highlighted the positive impacts of educational tourism (Bretag & van der Veen, 2017; Solarin et al., 2025). For example, it brings significant economic contributions to the host and home nations through cross-cultural academic mobility (Iskhakova et al., 2023). This type of experiential learning enhances participants' knowledge, personal growth, and cross-cultural understanding beyond the conventional classroom learning environment (Bentley et al., 2025; Falk et al., 2012). Educational travel is generally understood to have emerged during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from the tradition of the Grand Tour (Çevik, 2024). It was particularly popular among the social elite, where participation in such journeys represented a crucial stage in personal and cultural development. Today, educational tourism encompasses school field trips and study abroad programs (Chen et al., 2025; Dou et al., 2024). In general, educational tourists tend to stay longer and interact more with local communities at destinations (Xu & Ho, 2024). For this reason, global tourism bodies recognise educational travel as a strategic approach to achieve sustainable development goals (UNWTO, 2019).

Today, educational tourism enhances traditional pedagogy, emphasising the principles of experiential learning (Arcodia et al., 2021). In addition, it emphasises real-life value and hands-on experiences (Selvakumar et al., 2024). Many nations have formulated educational policies to support students' participation in study tours (Tong & Gao, 2025). In China, the market size for China's educational tourism is expected to grow significantly, reaching USD 339 billion by 2035 (Future Market Insights, 2026). The concept of study tour has emerged as a significant model that integrates tourism with educational experiences (Sun & Xu, 2021; Zhang et al., 2025). It is generally defined as an organised extracurricular activity coordinated by educational institutions and schools that combines learning with travel through structured group excursions, accompanied by centrally arranged food and beverages and lodging (Liu et al., 2025). In 2016, the Ministry of Education of China formally integrated study tours into the regular curriculum of primary and secondary schools (Liu et al., 2025). This shift marked a significant change in the positioning of study tours, which progressively changed from optional activities into a formally endorsed educational mechanism that may promote quality-oriented education (Sun & Xu, 2021).

Previous studies highlighted that educational tourism-related studies are under-researched (McGladdery & Lubbe, 2017). McGladdery and Lubbe (2017) called for more empirical research, particularly in school-based educational tourism, which is under-researched due to methodological and ethical challenges. Smithers (2026) reported the successes and failures of study tours. We used Luoyang City, China, as the case study. Luoyang is a historical city that is rich in cultural heritage attractions and has a complete educational tourism supply chain (Luoyang Municipal People's Government, 2026). However, study tours are characterised by fragmented governance, where government departments, schools, and private enterprises operate in isolation. Furthermore, there is no clear distinction about the roles of stakeholders in study tours. To address these research gaps, this study examines stakeholder collaboration in the development of sustainable educational tourism, using Luoyang City, China, as a case study. Specifically, the study aims to:

- **Objective 1:** Identify the key stakeholders involved in educational tourism and examine their respective roles.
- **Objective 2:** Examine existing stakeholder collaboration practices and the barriers affecting sustainable educational tourism development.
- **Objective 3:** Develop a stakeholder collaboration framework to support the sustainable development of educational tourism.

Literature review

Theoretical foundation

The concept of study tour is designed in a way that bridges the gap between traditional classrooms and real-world environments (Honebein et al., 1993). It comprises a complex education tourism activity that involves multiple actors, material resources, and experiential learning processes. In this study, three theories are adopted as the theoretical foundation to guide the development of a stakeholder collaboration model for sustainable educational tourism, namely Stakeholder Theory, Actor-Network Theory (ANT), and Experiential Learning Theory (ELT).

Stakeholder theory posits that all social practices are embedded within complex networks of social relationships, and that various stakeholder groups all have legitimate interests and

value expectations (Friedman & Miles, 2002). When Stakeholder Theory applies to educational tourism or in specific context of a study tour, the scope of consideration has become broader than just learning experiences (Tomasi et al., 2020). Different stakeholders place varying emphasis on the experiential dimensions of educational tourism projects: students prioritize hands-on participation and knowledge gain; higher education institutions focus on academic rigor and brand influence; while communities prioritize cultural respect, economic benefits, and the effectiveness of heritage preservation (Tomasi et al., 2020; Chauhan, 2025). Drawing on Stakeholder Theory, traditional short-term study tours can gradually be transformed into an educational tourism model that embodies both ethical values and sustainability (Long et al., 2014; Chai et al., 2025), establishing a long-term, stable collaborative system that balances the interests of all stakeholders.

The development of ANT is largely a response to the limitations of traditional sociological methods, which often treat society and technology as separate entities. Consequently, ANT adopts a principle of generalized symmetry, treating human and non-human actors as equally important components of a network (McLean & Hassard, 2004). ANT in education is a sociological framework that can assist researchers and scholars in better understanding the complex networks of relationships that influence educational practices, policies, and environments. In this study, educational tourism is a particularly suitable area for analysis using ANT, as it involves a wide range of stakeholders across multiple industries and sectors. By utilising ANT to design coordination mechanisms and clearly define coordinating entities, information sharing and collaboration among different team members can be promoted to help better confront this complexity between human (e.g., teachers, tour guides, local community, and policymakers) and non-human actors (cultural heritage sites, museums, curriculum, and transportation) involved in the study tour activities.

Kolb (1984) argues that learning is a continuous, cyclical process in which individuals internalise knowledge and enhance their abilities through the dynamic interaction among experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation (Kolb,1984). He then proposed the ELT. The theory explains how people acquire knowledge differently, shaped by their interpretations of their experiences (Yardley et al., 2012). In the field of tourism studies, ELT is widely used to explain the educational value of the tourism experience. Experiential learning theory was also applied in a previous study to explore how students engaged with and understood their experiences while studying abroad for a short duration studying abroad (STSA) in four different countries, including the UAE, Russia, Vietnam, and the USA (Iskhakova et al., 2023). Likewise, the previous study investigates how short-duration international educational tours (SDIETs) change students' learning outcomes in management education, based on a source in ELT (Bhargava et al., 2024).

Educational tourism and study tour

Educational tourism is popular and was first introduced during the Western colonial era (Li & Liang, 2020). The history of educational tourism is extensive and has gradually developed into an important field of tourism studies. Its early forms are often associated with the "Grand Tours" of Europe. The “Grand Tour” emerged in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries, driven by the increasing recognition of tourism as a method to develop students’ learning abilities (Díaz-Andreu, 2020; Grenby, 2024). Educational tourism is increasingly viewed as an emerging market that integrates travel, learning, cultural exchange, and personal

development (Ritchie, 2003). McGladdery and Lubbe (2017) explained that education can be understood both as the purpose of travel and as the outcome of the travel experience. It encompasses not only formal education or international student mobility but also a wide range of travel experiences in which learning is intentionally integrated into tourism activities. Wasaya et al. (2024) emphasize that most tourism studies have only partially incorporated the concept of education, failing to capture its full complexity, which has limited the development of theory.

Educational tourism is closely linked to experiential learning, in which learners acquire knowledge through direct participation, observation, interaction, and reflection (Kolb, 1984; Ritchie, 2003; Tan et al., 2022). It can also promote economic growth in both destination and origin regions by attracting students, institutions, families, and learning groups (Tang, 2021; Xu & Ho, 2024). Sie, Patterson, and Pegg (2016) argued that educational tourism should be understood based on two important continuums. In the continuum of learning, leisure travel prioritizes tourism (tourism as the primary focus) and is often perceived as unstructured or unplanned, where informal learning occurs while travelling. On the other hand, at the other continuum lies educational tourism, which formally incorporates learning into curricula (education as the primary focus) and is motivated by extrinsic incentives such as getting course credits through exchange programs or undergoing overseas training for career development. Nonetheless, Pitman et al. (2011) argued that educational tourism is an informal learning that can be positioned in the middle of the continuum. It combines personal enjoyment and learning while participating in activities (Sie et al., 2016). Therefore, educational tourism is regarded as experiential learning and transformative experience that integrates education and tourism (Cho, Tan & Chiu, 2021; Richards, 2011).

In China, “study tours” (educational travel) have become one of the primary forms of educational tourism. By systematically integrating extracurricular learning, hands-on experiences, and cultural immersion, they embody the essential characteristic of educational tourism: “learning through travel” (Tan et al., 2022). It is a structured educational activity that involves both traditional classrooms and real-world environments (Honebein et al., 1993). It aims to enhance learners’ knowledge, understanding and skills. A study tour is generally organised as a short-term learning experience to integrate theoretical learning with practical exposure through immersion in diverse cultural, industrial and academic fields (Orpett Long et al., 2008). Currently, overseas study tours have become an important component of the international tourism market (Chau et al., 2023). This tour is not only limited to international contexts, but domestic tours also serve as powerful learning platforms, especially when integrated with curriculum design.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative research methods, namely semi-structured interviews, to gain an in-depth understanding of the actual operational models of collaboration among stakeholders in the education and tourism sectors in Luoyang City. An interview guide was used to direct the exploration of key issues and questions. The original interview questions, prepared in English, were back-translated into Chinese (Brislin, 1970) and checked by a Chinese linguistics lecturer proficient in both languages. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin, a language familiar to the participants. Before the actual data collection, emails were sent to the participants to seek approval. Following consent from the participants, each

interview was audio-recorded, and notes were taken for verification purposes. The confidentiality and consent statement was shared with each participant before their interview began. They were also briefed on the purpose of the interview and their right to withdraw. Interviews were conducted at the participants' convenience, including in the meeting rooms and cafeterias. Once theoretical saturation is achieved, it signifies the stage where no new information or themes could further expand the existing findings (Saunders et al., 2018). This study was approved by the university's Human Ethics Committee prior to data collection. All personal and organisational identifiers were removed from the transcripts and replaced with codes (e.g., R1 to R14) to maintain absolute confidentiality. Audio files, transcripts, and consent forms were stored on a secure, password-protected cloud drive accessible only to the research team members.

The data gathered were analysed using thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2023). The first step requires the researcher to familiarize with the data collected by reading the data multiple times to discover initial patterns. This continuous action builds a thorough understanding of the content, allowing researchers to determine initial concepts that will subsequently turn into codes. The second step in thematic analysis was initial coding. The researcher reads through all the data and generates codes without yet integrating them into an overall analytical framework. During this stage, data segments were classified and labeled, and coding categories corresponding to specific phenomena were identified; researchers are encouraged to explore entirely new categories without restriction. The third step was theme extraction, which involved integrating the various codes to distil overarching research themes. In Step 4, the researcher reviewed and refined the preliminary themes. The theme reviews primarily involved two aspects: first, verifying whether each theme accurately reflects the content of the coded data it encompasses; second, assessing whether the themes are consistent with the entire dataset and the research questions. During this process, the researcher may split, merge, adjust, or delete themes based on the data content until the themes adequately capture the complexity, diversity, and nuanced meanings within the data. The next step is to define and name themes. During this phase, the focus was on determining what each theme describes about the data and how it integrates into the broader story that the data uncovers. The final step was to report themes.

To guarantee the academic rigour of this qualitative research, we followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four-criteria framework for establishing trustworthiness, which consists of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was achieved through data triangulation, member checking, and persistent observation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We triangulated interview data with findings from document reviews and prior literature to check for consistency. Member checking was conducted by emailing the transcribed interviews and initial findings back to the participants, allowing them to verify the accuracy of their responses (Motulsky, 2021). Dependability was established by documenting a detailed audit trail that records every decision made regarding research design, sampling, data collection, and analysis (Mutanana & Shoko, 2026). Confirmability was supported by keeping detailed reflexive memos, ensuring that our interpretations are grounded directly in the participants' statements rather than the researcher's personal biases (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Finally, to facilitate transferability, we provide a thick description of Luoyang's educational tourism context, the participant profiles, and the empirical findings, allowing other researchers to assess the applicability of our framework to similar destinations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

The participants occupy senior decision-making, administrative, and operational roles, allowing this study to capture both strategic and practical perspectives. This participant group comprises three government representatives, two travel agency managers, two school and higher education administrators, two educational camp managers, two hotel operators, one transportation provider, one cultural heritage attraction director, and one industry association leader. The seniority and cross-sectoral diversity of these respondents provide a robust, multifaceted foundation for analyzing the policy, pedagogical, and operational dynamics of educational tourism. Such diverse representations cover all major stakeholders in the local study tour supply chain (see Table 1).

Table 1
Socio-demographic profile of participants.

Code	Designation	Stakeholder Category
R1	Head of Marketing	Cultural & Tourism Enterprise
R2	Deputy General Manager	Tourism Operator
R3	Secretary-General	Industry Association
R4	General Manager	Tourism Support Service (Transport)
R5	Chief Commander	Educational Base / Camp
R6	Director, Moral Education Department	Educational Institution (School)
R7	Head, Resource Development Section	Government
R8	Head, Basic Education Section	Government
R9	Manager, Curriculum Development	Cultural & Educational Base
R10	Front Office Manager	Hospitality / Tourism Support
R11	Marketing Department	Hospitality / Tourism Support
R12	Managing Director	Cultural Tourism Enterprise
R13	Dean, School of Cultural Heritage & Communication	Higher Education Institution
R14	General Manager	Tourism Operator

The findings revealed five interconnected themes. These themes explain how educational tourism functions in Luoyang, highlighting the roles, practices, barriers, and opportunities shaping stakeholder collaboration. It shows that no single stakeholder can operate in isolation and needs collaboration to make the study tour a success.

Theme 1: Stakeholder Ecosystem in Luoyang Educational Tourism

Participants consistently described a highly interconnected ecosystem in which each player contributes specific resources and expertise. For example, government agencies play a leading regulatory and planning role. For instance, R7 explained that their main task is to transform historical and cultural resources into educational content. In addition to policy support, the education bureau (R8) evaluates the safety and suitability of destinations before schools are allowed to organize trips. These findings show that the government's role is much broader than just industry regulation. However, private-sector stakeholders have a very different focus. Although travel operators, transportation companies, and hotels are deeply committed to educational goals, they must also prioritize financial sustainability. For example, the transport provider (R4) noted that their main objective is to increase vehicle utilization and revenue. They cannot continue to collaborate if operations are not financially viable. This commercial interest does not contradict the educational purpose. Reliable, safe transport and comfortable hotels are necessary elements of any study tour. Without these supporting

services, schools cannot deliver high-quality outdoor programs. The success of the ecosystem depends on recognizing these complementary interests.

The findings also suggested that students and parents are the core beneficiaries of this ecosystem. While students gain hands-on knowledge and personal skills, parents dominate the decision-making process. Almost all respondents noted that parental trust is a huge factor in a program's success. Parents want safe, affordable trips that deliver real educational value, rather than superficial sightseeing. This expectation drives educational camps (R5, R9) and cultural attractions (R12) to upgrade their programs constantly. They must demonstrate that their activities support character development, teamwork, and cultural awareness. When all these interests align, the ecosystem functions as a unified whole, co-creating meaningful learning experiences for the students.

The relationship between educational camps and travel agencies is not just a commercial contract, but rather a deep operational partnership. Travel agencies hold the marketing channels and direct access to schools, while camps provide the physical infrastructure and structured curriculum. Neither side can survive without the other. If a travel agency designs a great marketing campaign but the camp facilities are subpar, the school will not return next year. Conversely, if a camp builds state-of-the-art facilities but cannot access school networks, it will sit empty. This mutual dependency forces both parties to align their quality standards and share risks, proving that the strength of the ecosystem lies in its relationships.

Theme 2: Stakeholder Collaboration Practices

The findings revealed a mix of formal institutional mechanisms and informal relationship-building practices. It was found that formal coordination is often led by the government or industry associations. For example, R3 explained that their organization acts as a key link between the government, schools, and enterprises. This formal bridge allows different actors to discuss shared problems, coordinate schedules, and build partnerships. Furthermore, formal contracts and service-level agreements also help define clear boundaries of responsibility during program execution, making sure that student safety and service quality are strictly maintained.

Informal networks are equally important in making collaboration successful. Many participants stressed that trust and long-term professional relationships are the real grease that keeps the machinery running. As R1 noted, many collaborations are maintained simply because people trust each other and have worked together before. Schools prefer to work with reputable, trusted operators who have a proven track record. This informal social capital takes years to build, but it allows for much smoother coordination and faster decision-making. Professional networking events and informal gatherings are highly valued because they create opportunities for new partnerships to grow.

Experiential learning co-creation is the most practical form of collaboration observed. This involves schools, museums, and educational camps working together to design customized curricula. Instead of simply visiting a site, students engage in hands-on workshops like Tang Sancai pottery firing at cultural parks (R12) or structured museum-based research (R14). Educators (R6) check that these activities align directly with academic learning outcomes, while base managers (R5) handle the physical implementation. This co-creation process

transforms abstract cultural resources into interactive learning environments. It is a highly collaborative effort that combines educational expertise with destination resources to deliver rich, memorable experiences.

Knowledge sharing practices were found to take the form of joint curriculum development workshops. During these sessions, schoolteachers sit down with museum docents and camp instructors to co-write lesson plans. Teachers explain their learning objectives and classroom need, while site instructors share their local heritage expertise and safety constraints. By exchanging this professional knowledge, they can design programs that are both educationally rich and operationally feasible, reducing the friction that often occurs during trip execution.

Theme 3: Challenges and Barriers to Sustainable Collaboration

Despite positive practices, stakeholders face severe challenges that limit the effectiveness of their collaboration. The most prominent barrier is governance fragmentation. Educational tourism involves multiple government departments, including education, culture, tourism, and transportation. This multi-headed administrative structure often leads to overlapping responsibilities and highly complex approval procedures. As R7 commented, the biggest challenge is bringing different departments together and making sure everyone moves in the same direction. Without a unified coordination body, schools and operators must navigate bureaucratic hurdles that complicate planning and delay program implementation, reducing overall collaborative efficiency.

In addition, divergent interests and communication gaps have also created major conflict. While schools focus strictly on educational outcomes and risk minimization, commercial operators must manage costs and logistics. This misalignment can easily lead to misunderstandings. For instance, R14 explained that schools sometimes demand high-quality educational activities without fully understanding the operational costs involved. This gap is widened by a lack of regular communication channels. Many stakeholders do not fully understand each other's needs or expectations, which can erode trust over time. When communication is irregular, rumours and misunderstandings can damage long-term partnerships.

It was found that safety pressures and strict regulatory requirements add to the operational burden. For example, student safety is a non-negotiable priority, especially when working with minors. Recent national standards like the LB/T 054-2025 requirements have made safety regulations much more thorough. While these standards are necessary, they increase the administrative burden on schools and operators. R6 explained that schools must conduct thorough risk assessments and draft detailed emergency plans before any trip is approved. This high level of responsibility makes many teachers hesitant to organise study tours, fearing personal liability in case of an accident.

To overcome communication gaps and trust deficits, some organizations have begun experimenting with informal liaison roles. These liaisons are individuals who understand both the educational and commercial worlds, acting as translators between schools and tour operators. They help clarify expectations, negotiate pricing, and resolve disputes before they escalate into major conflicts. For example, few participants (R3, R13, R14) revealed that some

stakeholders do not fully understand the needs and expectations of others. Therefore, effective collaboration requires continuous communication between educational institutions and industry practitioners.

Having a trusted mediator on hand can significantly reduce the risk of a partnership breaking down, helping to build mutual respect and long-term stability. This informal solution shows that while formal contracts are necessary, personal relationships are the real key to overcoming operational barriers. Resource and funding limitations represent another hurdle. Some participants (R2, R5, R9) highlighted that developing high-quality study tour programs requires significant, continuous investment in facility upgrades, curriculum design, staff training, and safety equipment. In addition, many smaller operators and educational camps struggle with limited budgets. This financial pressure restricts their ability to innovate or expand their services. For example, one participant (R2) emphasized that programme development involves costs, and stakeholders often have limited budgets. On top of that, some participants (R5 & R9) addressed that there is a severe resource gap between urban and rural areas. While urban schools can afford high-end, multi-day programs, rural students are often left out due to a lack of funding and support. This resource imbalance threatens the inclusivity and sustainability of the industry.

Theme 4: Opportunities for Strengthening Stakeholder Collaboration

Participants identified several opportunities that could help strengthen collaboration. Some participants (R3, R7, & R8) agreed that strong government leadership is a key driver. For example, National and local authorities are increasingly promoting the integration of culture, tourism, and education. This political support creates favourable conditions for building formal coordination platforms. Similarly, government agencies can act as central facilitators, bringing diverse sectors together to align their goals and resources. By establishing clear industry standards and providing financial incentives, the government can encourage more active and structured participation from the private sector.

Digital innovation is another opportunity highlighted by some participants. The rapid development of information and communication technologies offers powerful tools for improving coordination. One participant (R3) explained that joint digital platforms can connect schools, travel operators, and educational camps in real-time, allowing them to share resources, manage schedules, and conduct program evaluations. Another participant (R14) pointed out that technology helps to coordinate much more efficiently with partners. By reducing information delays and administrative costs, digital platforms can eliminate communication asymmetry and build mutual trust. They also make it easier for smaller operators to access market opportunities and share resources.

Public-private-academic partnerships represent a highly promising model for future innovation. By bringing universities, schools, cultural sites, and private businesses together, destinations can combine their unique strengths to co-create high-quality programs. Universities can provide research support, curriculum guidance, and professional talent development, while private operators handle logistics and marketing. R13 highly recommended this collaborative model from the vocational college, who highlighted how academic expertise can enhance the quality of study tours. By working together, these partners can build more resilient, innovative networks that can adapt to changing market

demands. Public-private-academic partnerships can be further strengthened by involving vocational colleges in local destination management. These institutions are uniquely positioned to provide practical training and talent development, helping to professionalize the study tour workforce. By collaborating with local businesses, colleges can design specialized training programs for study tour instructors, ensuring they possess both pedagogical skills and safety management expertise. This joint effort not only improves service quality across the destination, but also provides students with valuable career opportunities, building a sustainable pipeline of professional talent for the local industry.

Finally, internationalisation and market expansion offer a final major opportunity. Luoyang's rich historical heritage has a universal appeal that can attract wider audiences, including international students. This expanding market motivates stakeholders to constantly improve their standards. However, one participant (R13) was concerned that to compete globally, operators must upgrade their facilities, refine their curricula, and train their instructors to deliver world-class cultural interpretation. This drive for quality encourages stronger collaboration and innovation across the entire supply chain. By positioning Luoyang as a nationally and internationally influential study tour destination, stakeholders can build a more sustainable, high-value ecosystem.

Theme 5: Towards a Stakeholder Collaboration Framework

The participants mentioned that an integrated stakeholder collaboration framework for sustainable educational tourism is possible. This framework is not a static model, but an evolving, system-based framework designed to guide multi-sector cooperation. The findings suggested that the framework consists of five core dimensions: governance and coordination, communication and knowledge exchange, shared resource integration, experiential learning integration, and sustainable development outcomes. These dimensions work together to align stakeholder interests, build mutual trust, and co-create educational value for the students.

The foundation of the framework is governance and coordination, led by government agencies. However, R3 stated that educational tourism includes many departments and stakeholders, and their coordination is not always smooth. This is supported by R8, that more coordination between educational authorities and tourism agencies would enhance implementation effectiveness. This requires establishing a central coordination platform to align different public departments and define clear boundaries of responsibility. For example, communication and knowledge exchange are maintained through regular workshops, training programs, and digital platforms. This constant dialogue helps build mutual trust and reduces information asymmetry.

The third dimension is shared resource integration, where public, private, and academic actors combine their assets to design innovative programs. This resource sharing is important for overcoming budget constraints and improving destination quality. For example, one participant (R14) shared that educational tourism requires cooperation among schools, tourism enterprises, museums, and government departments.

Experiential learning integration represents the core educational philosophy of the framework. This ensures that study tours remain student-centred, organic extensions of the

formal school curriculum. Educational tourism is regarded by R6 as a supplement to formal education that allows gaining knowledge through experience. By connecting classroom learning with authentic cultural, natural, and historical sites, stakeholders can co-create immersive learning environments that grow independent thinking, creativity, and social responsibility. Finally, all these collaborative efforts are oriented towards achieving balanced sustainable development outcomes. Some participants (R3, R5, and R7) highlighted that stakeholder collaboration should contribute to educational, cultural, economic, social, and heritage conservation outcomes, ensuring long-term sustainability for all stakeholders. This means that study tours must generate educational, cultural, social, and economic value for all participants, protecting local heritage and community well-being while ensuring business viability.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our empirical findings offer a fresh perspective on how destinations can manage stakeholder collaboration for sustainable educational tourism. By linking the data directly to Stakeholder Theory, Actor-Network Theory and Experiential Learning Theory, it shows how relationships, material elements, and educational goals shape the destination value network. This discussion seeks to explain the underlying logic of multi-sector cooperation in study tours. Thus, an integrative stakeholder collaboration framework for Luoyang City has been established (see Figure 1).

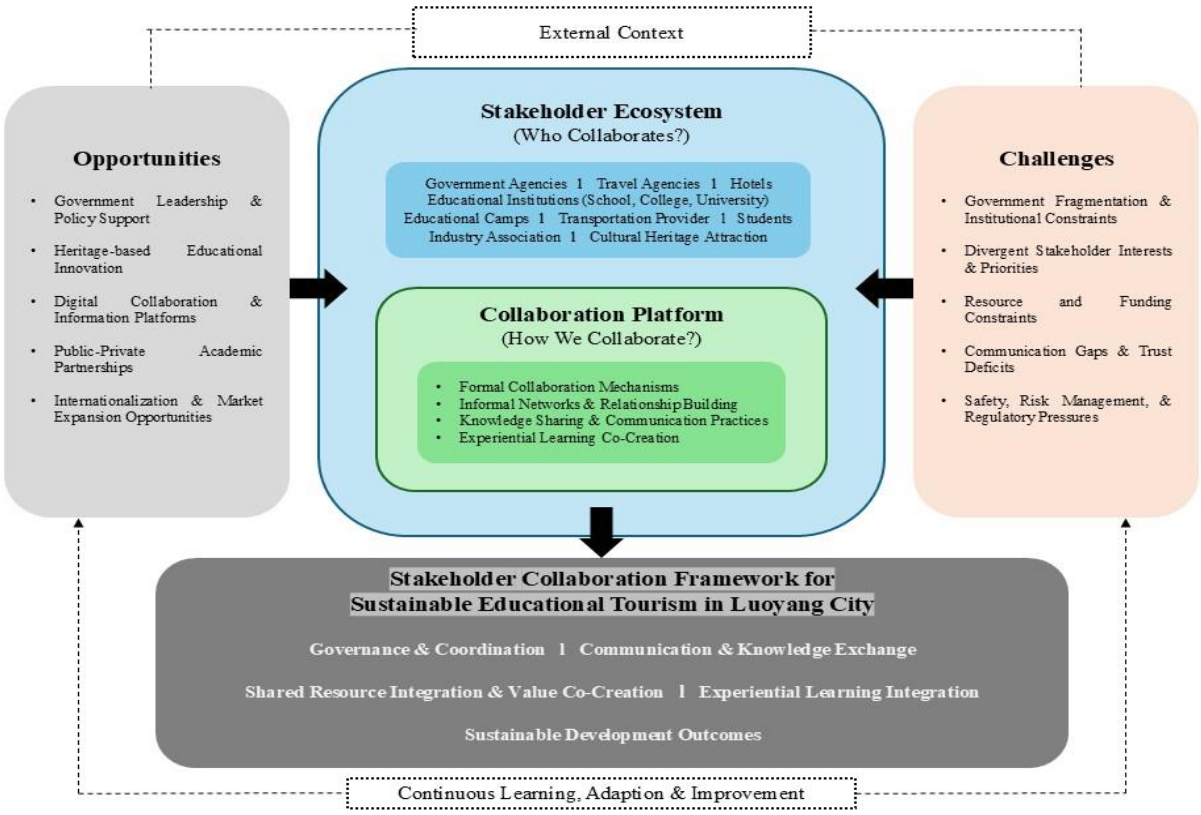


Figure 1 Proposed stakeholder collaboration framework for sustainable educational tourism in Luoyang City, China

The stakeholder ecosystem in Luoyang represents a clear application of Stakeholder Theory. Traditional tourism research often focuses on a single dominant interest like profit or tourist

satisfaction, ignoring the wider network of relationships. In contrast, our findings show that study tours are built on a highly interconnected web of public and private interests. Government bureaus seek policy implementation and cultural promotion. Private companies require financial viability. Schools demand educational quality and student safety. These interests might seem conflicting at first glance, but in practice, they are highly complementary. The long-term competitiveness of the destination depends on recognising these dependencies and balancing the needs of all parties.

Similarly, Actor-Network Theory explains how these diverse actors are aligned and coordinated. From an ANT perspective, the success of study tours is not just about human relationships. It is about the stable alignment of heterogeneous human and non-human actors in a network. In Luoyang, the ancient cultural heritage resources, school curricula, digital platforms, and safety regulations are not passive backgrounds. They are active non-human elements that shape and guide how schools, travel agencies, and government bureaus interact. For instance, the implementation of the LB/T 054-2025 safety requirements forces travel operators and school administrators to negotiate and formalize their roles. This continuous process of negotiation and stabilization of the network is what allows collaboration to succeed.

Our findings also provide strong support for Experiential Learning Theory. While schools are the primary organizers, the co-creation of learning experiences requires active contributions from the entire supply chain. Museums, educational camps, and travel agencies are not just service providers, they are important pedagogical partners. They help schools translate abstract classroom knowledge into interactive, hands-on experiences. For example, visiting the Longmen Grottoes is not a simple sightseeing trip. It is a structured learning process where students observe ancient Buddhist art, reflect on its historical context, and apply this knowledge in classroom projects. This collaborative approach ensures that the educational objectives are met, making the travel experience memorable and meaningful.

Theoretical and practical implications

This study contributes to educational tourism literature by extending the understanding of stakeholder collaboration from individual organisational roles to an integrated supply-side ecosystem. The proposed framework brings together Stakeholder Theory, Actor-Network Theory, and Experiential Learning Theory to explain how institutional interests, human and non-human actors, and educational objectives interact in the delivery of study tours. This theoretical integration provides a basis for understanding stakeholder coordination as both an organisational and educational process. Contextually, the study offers empirical insights from Luoyang City, China, where educational tourism depends on collaboration among government agencies, educational institutions, tourism enterprises, and cultural heritage organisations. The findings identify fragmented governance, competing institutional priorities, and resource constraints as barriers to collaboration, while highlighting the importance of coordinated governance, resource sharing, and joint curriculum development. The proposed framework provides a context-specific reference for destination authorities and educational tourism providers seeking to improve stakeholder coordination while maintaining educational quality and supporting sustainable destination development.

From a practical perspective, our framework serves as a valuable guide for destination management. For government officials, our findings suggest a shift from simple industry regulation to active, cross-sector facilitation. Officials should focus on building integrated policies that align the goals of the education, culture, and tourism sectors, reducing administrative fragmentation and bureaucracy. Establishing formal coordination channels and digital consultation platforms can significantly improve interdepartmental communication and mutual trust. These efforts will help build long-term, stable partnerships that can adapt to changing industry needs.

Private-sector operators and cultural site managers can also draw valuable lessons from our study. For example, travel agencies and educational camps must move beyond traditional leisure tourism models, focusing instead on the instructional design of their programs. They should work closely with educators to guarantee that their activities are tightly aligned with formal school curricula. This requires investing in staff training to develop professional study tour instructors, a qualification officially recognized in 2026. On top of that, operators should actively leverage digital technologies to share resources, coordinate schedules, and manage safety risks, enhancing operational efficiency and destination competitiveness.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Like any qualitative inquiry, this study has several limitations that represent opportunities for future research. The first limitation relates to our spatial scope, which was restricted to Luoyang City, China. While Luoyang provides a rich and highly relevant case study, its institutional environment, policies, and relationship dynamics are unique. These local peculiarities limit the direct generalizability of our framework to other regions with different cultural resources or policy frameworks. Future research could expand the geographical coverage, comparing different study tour destinations across China or internationally to test the general applicability of our findings.

Another major limitation is the scope of stakeholders involved in this study. Our research focused strictly on institutional stakeholders from the supply side, including government officials, school administrators, travel operators, and cultural site managers. We did not directly capture the perspectives of students, parents, or local communities, who are also key players in the educational tourism ecosystem. Parents dominate the decision-making process, and local communities host and interact with the visitors. Future studies could include these groups to gain a more complete, multi-sided view of collaboration. This would provide valuable insights into student satisfaction, parental trust, and community well-being.

The evolving nature of stakeholder collaboration represents a final limitation. Relationships, governance structures, and technology systems are constantly changing in response to new policies, market demands, and innovations. Our qualitative data captures a snapshot of collaboration in Luoyang in 2026. A longitudinal research design would be incredibly valuable to track how these relationships evolve. This would allow researchers to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of our proposed framework and refine it in response to new opportunities and challenges.

Declaration on the use of AI in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT-4 in order to improve language clarity and readability. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication

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