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Internationalising research in a neoliberal climate: maintaining integrity in developing and executing funded comparative research

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ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the debate on the impact of internationalising research in the neoliberal climate, through the case of a multinational project funded through competitive bidding. While neoliberalisation of higher education has been explored from multiple perspectives, the impact around competitive research funding as a performativity measure has not received due attention, in particular concerning international collaboration. Research supported by competitive funding is often managed through rigid measures combining narrow success criteria and tight accountability. This paper discusses the challenges in developing and executing an international project in this context, as encountered by a multinational research team. Analysing the team's reflective writing and written conversations spanning over three years, we illustrate how the team managed to engage in genuine knowledge-building and collaboration, which the global neoliberal research governance system inadvertently undermines. The paper concludes with some recommendations to redress such unintended consequences and effects.

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Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are subject to neoliberal changes globally. Neoliberalising education is characterised by business logic and the pursuit of financial gain through what used to be non-profit activities (You and Choi 2023). Neoliberal globalisation gears HEIs to engage in internationalisation – a deliberate action in part to cope with globalisation led by fierce economic competition on a global scale, and by rapid advances in information and communication technologies (Witt 2010, 38). The critical literature on HEI neoliberalisation in different national systems has documented its detrimental effects on institutions and academics. For one thing, HEIs turn themselves into entrepreneurial entities, turning many of their activities into business-like risk calculation, risk management and pursuit of revenue maximisation (Tang and Zhang 2023). Such change has pressurised academics to produce research that has immediate economic benefits, while those pursuing knowledge for its own sake are devalued (Desierto and Maio 2020). These

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changes also subject researchers to the gaze of performance metrics and accountability (Gounari and Grollios 2012). Such changes have resulted in a culture of hyper-competition and a focus on short-term gains, rather than on the long-term development of knowledge and skills, which sometimes compromises academic freedom and education as a public good (Horta et al. 2019; Takayama 2009). These, in turn, lead to compromises in the quality of research and teaching, and institutional mission drifts, to name a few (e.g. Ball 2003; Leathwood and Read 2013; Petersen 2016; Shore 2010).

This line of research also shows that, in recent years, this undesirable impact has been intensified around research activity, as research performance has become a constitutive dimension of higher education policies and has been increasingly equated with measurable research outcomes (Hauptman Komotar 2019; Macfarlane 2017; Robson and Wihlborg 2019; Viseu 2016). In particular, in many national HE systems and institutions, track records in successful grant bidding and international scholarly reputation have become prerequisites for promotion for tenure-track faculty, as well as 'a condition for becoming visible' in the institution (Petersen 2016, 110). Thus, researchers are pressured to prioritise the success of a research proposal, often against their own individual research interests, if they are to succeed in the performativity culture. If the proposed study involves international collaboration, the track records of the research collaborators also carry value, so they are pushed for international collaboration (Horta 2022).

We acknowledge that the research literature on both neoliberalism of HE institutions and internationalisation policies is vast, however, these investigate the matters at the macro, institutional level. Our study delves further into the matter, and explores how individuals live in such a climate, while creating and executing a funded international project. Placed within the field of critical inquiry, and as a way of illustrating such effects tangibly, this paper reflects on some of the complexities encountered by researchers involved in designing and realising an international research project, set against the neoliberal climate affecting universities. Drawing on reflective writing pieces and written communications among the leaders of the four international research teams working in HEIs in Hong Kong, Australia, Greece and Japan, and a consultant involved in the study, the paper substantiates the argument that while international comparative studies have always been challenging endeavours – raising issues of design, selection of cases/sampling, and comparison of findings (e.g. George and Bennett 2005; Kosmützky 2018; Walford 2001), the adverse conditions currently holding sway most likely add another layer of obstacles. In addition to highlighting the challenges around the research bidding and project management, we also identify what kept the project afloat and, importantly, helped researchers care for their academic soul, so to speak, despite such challenges: the arrangement of project mentors and senior team members' benevolence, trust in the best intentions of the team members and giving allowances to each other, and openness to meet in the mid-ground.

In the following literature review, we link neoliberal internationalisation policies of HE, performativity and the imperative to secure external funding; analyse the challenges for researchers engaging in international research collaborations, and introduce our research questions to address the identified research gap. Subsequently, we discuss the methodology of reflective co-writing that we have followed in developing the present paper and provide a brief outline of the substantive international comparative study which is what brought the international research collaborators/co-authors into this joint endeavour. We then describe the case study presented in this paper to set the scene, before discussing our critical reflections on our experience. In particular, we discuss these challenges with reference to issues that include the need for recrafting of identity, developing relationships after the start of the project, incorporating the national and institutional contextual differences under pressure, the tension between an inflexible project management system and the organic, ever-changing nature of research, the acceptance of the shifting locus of leadership as the project evolved, and dealing with differential pressures to perform as opposed to measurable output-driven monitoring. This process reveals the tensions created by the neoliberal framing of the system and researchers' pursuit of academic integrity. Finally, in the concluding section, arguing that doing an international comparative study under the regime of neoliberal internationalisation of HE is an intricate political process, we suggest that designing and carrying out a viable project entails a series of balancing acts between external demands and substantive research interests. The paper helps researchers 'to take another look at what otherwise become taken-for-granted' and revisit the questions raised by Denzin and Lincoln: whether we can 'accept and live with the tensions and contradictions posted to us', 'what should we defend, and what might we give up', and 'how do we respond to the enterprise culture of neo-liberalism increasingly so pervasive in every aspect of the research process' (2005, 407–408).

Neoliberal internationalisation, performativity and grant bidding

The adoption of neoliberal logic has led to the corporatisation of universities, and the related embedding of a business management system into their governance, prioritises financial gain over academic integrity, and narrows the space of academic freedom (Giroux 2014; Tang and Zhang 2023). Universities' central missions of research and education are often displaced by profit generation and motives, sometimes leading to an identity crisis (Readings 1996). This situation has been intensified by global policies on the internationalisation of HE institutions. Internationalisation policies typically evolved from attempts to attract international students and expanded to the internationalisation of research, though their interaction with the system and usage are different across contexts. Internationalisation policies and processes have dramatically transformed higher education systems, especially when they interact with managerialism, fiscal crisis, and corporate culture (Khoo et al. 2019). What further aggravates the situation is external pressure to generate income from research activities and to compete in global ranking systems by means of the number of publications in international, high-impact journals, citations, and other metrics (Warren et al. 2021). In this context, grant bidding gains more prominence in the academic's work. At the same time, however, Marginson (2013) argues that despite such trends, higher education cannot fully become capitalist due to its public good nature. Such institutional-level tension creates conflict in individuals. Shore (2010), through the case of New Zealand, illustrates such contradictions academics face between the academic expectation to conduct pure research and to follow government policy which prioritises research for immediate, more instrumental economic benefits.

Performativity and managerial accountability are two key manifestations of the neoliberalisation of higher education and are linked to different aspects of university operations. Performativity refers to the emphasis on quantifiable outcomes and the measurement of success, which has led to a focus on performance metrics and the commodification of knowledge (Ball 2012; Warren et al. 2021). Lyotard (1984) saw performativity manifesting in an emphasis on input-output equations in the working of institutions under what he regarded as the postmodern condition. In the context of grant bidding, this manifests as a hyper-competitive culture in which universities are incentivised to secure funding and maximise outputs. Managerial accountability, on the other hand, refers to the pressure on universities to demonstrate their value and justify their funding through metrics such as publications and research impact (Warren et al. 2021). This is closely linked to the Funded Project Management System in Hing Kong, which requires universities to report on the outcomes of their research projects and demonstrate their impact on society to secure future funding. This may also lead individuals to engage in negotiations between personal research interests and those that raise the chance to secure the grant and, subsequently, to accept close monitoring and additional pressure, to meet pre-specified goals and externally imposed expectations (Boden and Epstein 2006; Waitere et al. 2011).

Finally, individual academics make efforts to build international networks, as it allows for tapping into new funding sources beyond local research councils (Viseu 2016). Consequently, the urge to become more 'international' is associated with revenue-seeking as well as university positioning in global rankings (Khoo et al. 2019). As Page (2019) points out, individuals in many national HE systems are required to produce evidence of international research partnerships through the successful attainment of research grants involving international team members. Regardless of the potentiality of research to contribute to some kind of 'public good', performance-driven orientations lead academics to seek 'activities … which are likely to have a positive impact on measurable performance outcomes thus being seen to perform (Ball 2012, 20). As a result, to secure funding, much research has been instrumentalised to fit the interests of corporations and organisations, to contribute to immediate economic benefits, as well as politically framed national research priorities (Robson and Wihlborg 2019).

Challenges for international comparative research

Comparative study has good potential to generate new insights and ensure rigour, as it provides opportunities to see things from different perspectives and to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, especially when collaborating with investigators from different backgrounds and when comparing data generated from divergent national contexts (Denzin 1997). However–and going beyond the literature aiming to explore and explain the growth of international collaboration (e.g. Wagner and Leydesdorff 2005), we start with the view that international collaborations of funded projects are demanding enterprises (Kosmützky 2018). They require engagement and commitment from all partners, as well as knowledge and skills to co-ordinate activities, resolve conflicts, synthesise opposing views and interests, and facilitate a smooth development of the research process, at its different stages. What also affects the success of such international collaboration is the effective management of the cultural and social relationships among the team members and navigating the differential administration, regulatory environments and financial situations across contexts (Witt 2010).

For international comparative research, in particular, the very first step of finding the common research focus to compare is so complicated that it has won the accolade of being 'arguably the most difficult step' (George and Bennett 2005, 234). Further, the importance of selecting the unit of comparison cannot be overemphasised, as generalisation requires a strong theoretical foundation for the selection of research sites (Walford 2001). Perhaps partly reflecting this complexity, there is no agreement on the criteria for making the most appropriate selection of such units of analysis (Beck 2017).

Other challenges of international collaboration include the free-rider problem, potential spying, reduced creativity, competition among team members, individual recognition and credit problems (Yemini 2021). In many cases, power differentials might create additional difficulties in forging and maintaining the social relationships among the various collaborators. Furthermore, if the research team consists of members of different career stages, cultures and languages, and countries and time zones, they might encounter extra problems, due to different institutional and personal expectations, assumptions and investments (Wagner and Leydesdorff 2005).

Previous research has considered these challenges of international collaboration. However, most are from the STEM field (Horta 2022). Moreover, there are no in-depth, self-reflective studies which investigate how the intersection between, on the one hand, internationalisation demands and, on the other, performativity and managerial accountability, as manifested in international grant bidding, impact on what is researched and how. The available research that discusses the intersection between the two themes is concerned with effective ways to secure grants as an international team (e.g. Proctor et al. 2012), drivers of international collaboration (e.g. Jeong, Choi, and Kim 2014); impact of collaboration on citations and funding (e.g. Zhou, Cai, and Lyu 2020), the impact of securing grants on the productivity of collaborators (e.g. Jacob and Lefgren 2011), and how organisational features such as global ranking affect the practice of internationalisation and international collaboration in HEIs (Buckner 2020). However, none is concerned with the challenges that transnational collaborators face during the development and implementation of a funded project, or how they navigate through them. This paper addresses the gap, by investigating the material and discursive impact of the neoliberal imperative of performativity in the form of grant-bidding and its rigid management system on our international research project on public-private partnerships in respect of the provision of English language instruction for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

The investigation was led by the overall question: Within the context of neoliberal logics dominating the higher education sector globally, how do researchers attempt to maintain research integrity when designing and managing an international research project? This question was further elaborated by asking the following two questions:

1. What challenges does an international team face when *developing* a research bid under the neoliberal performativity regime, and how do they address them?
2. What challenges does an international team face when *executing* a funded project under the neoliberal managerial accountability regime, and how do they address them, if any?

By exploring these questions, this paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the enactment of international comparative research projects in the current neoliberal climate. The results of this investigation will be of interest to policymakers, researchers, and educators who seek to promote more democratic and equitable approaches to research in higher education particularly in international research collaborations.

Methodology: reflective co-writing as written focus group

The current paper was written through the experimental process of combining self-generated reflective pieces and reflective co-writing. The reflective co-writing provides insights into the experience, values and practices of the research collaborators. According to the few available references (Bell 2002; Heimans, Singh, and Barnes 2020; Jandrić et al. 2017; Pryor et al. 2009; Seidenschnur et al. 2020), during the production of the reflective co-writing, informants connect various events and give them meaning, a process which helps reveal a deep interpretative pattern that taps into hidden stories and assumptions they were unaware of. The act helps analyse and understand a holistic, complex, and rich experience (Bell 2002), and identify the social, economic and political relations that shape individuals' experiences and practices (Seidenschnur et al. 2020).

Reflective co-writing, we argue, is important not only for carrying out the project successfully, but also for sharpening the critical lens from which we address the topic under investigation, including the interrogation of our own (the researchers') role in defining the object of research (Heimans, Singh, and Barnes 2020). This process can be thought of as a written version of focus group research, using the synthesised narratives as a 'prompt' to help reflect on the inner workings of the project.

Our approach followed the one taken by Jandrić et al. (2017) and Pryor et al. (2009) in their endeavour to analyse the experience of collective writing. We set the timeline of this reflective paper from the time the team agreed to conduct a comparative study until the second year of the project, covering three years' collaboration around the proposed project and its pilots. The leaders of regional teams wrote individual reflective pieces about the process of developing the proposal, about two pages each, and assisted with prompting questions (Appendix 1). Meanwhile, our principal investigator (P.I.) collated emails and chats via instant messaging generated by the regional leaders (115 and two, respectively, about 20,000 words in total). A few messages were also collected from others including the university-appointed mentor and the research office. Only those which include decision-making were collated. The files attached to emails which reflect decisions, e.g. draft proposals with comments or queries (38 documents) – but not templates or references shared – were also collated and helped in making sense of the emails. The collated emails were pasted into one document, and organised chronologically, and the major events, e.g. submission deadlines or feedback from the faculty/university/grants council, were also noted in the file.

The P.I. then compared the content of the reflective pieces with the content of emails and the comments on the proposal, and raised queries if there were uncertainties or seeming inconsistencies, which led to confirmation of the content or revision. The team had a meeting over the content, to share their views of the produced text. Thematic content analysis was conducted on the reflective pieces and the notes made on them from the meeting, as well as the collated emails. The process involved descriptive coding, establishing relationships among codes and identifying overarching themes (Clarke and Braun 2013; Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2019). As an outcome of this process, the challenges pertaining to the intersections between research-bid and performativity management were identified and reported henceforth and the strategies that the team members adopted to deal with them.

The bidding context and the international research project

To provide a brief context of the grant application in Hong Kong where the bid was submitted, all applications must pass a series of internal reviews at department, faculty and institutional levels, before they can be submitted to the territory-wide competition.[1] Reviews are arranged by the institution, to increase the success of its staff, which affects the annual budget it receives from the government in the following year. The institution-arranged reviews involve both local and international reviewers. As the performance of government-funded universities is compared regarding both the success rate and the amount of secured funds, the university will only allow bids that are sufficiently competitive to go forward. Thus, this internal review process is high stakes; failing the internal review means a delay of a year for an academic to attempt submitting again, when the grant record affects the renewal of contracts and promotion. In the assessment at each level, a proposal is mostly given major/minor revisions, but some are rejected. Bids given revisions once again can be vetoed or accepted, depending on their response to the feedback. The internal reviews have positive and negative aspects. The former is because they can acculturate new bidders into the system and the culture and make the journey more collaborative and supportive. Also, the multi-level, multi-party process significantly strengthens the proposal. The latter because the decision not to take on board the suggestions may lead to interpersonal tensions, if not being vetoed from submission.

The international research project on which the team collaborated is a 4-year comparative study exploring the new education privatisation (NEP) in the provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), framed by policy enactment and path-dependence theories (e.g. Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012; Cohen 2017) and adopting a comparative case study approach (Bartlett and Vavrus 2016). NEP refers to policies and practices involving third parties (private companies, NGOs, philanthropies, and other civil society agencies) in the development and delivery of the message systems of schooling (curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation) (Bernstein 1971) and education more broadly, sometimes using (pseudo-) public funds rather than asking the beneficiary students to pay, thus constituting a 'new' education privatisation (Bates, Choi, and Kim 2021; Burch 2009).

Findings

Below, the interrelated issues and challenges we as a multi-national research team have faced are presented in the order of their appearance. While these problems can be encountered by research teams who conduct research that does not involve grant bidding or conducted against neoliberal pressures, we will illustrate how the context of grant bidding and high-stakes reporting has affected the research and the researchers.

International project development set against the neoliberal political climate

Recrafting identity

The topic of NEP was strategically chosen as it was an extension of the P.I.'s successfully completed project, which was expected to 'draw the attention of the evaluation panel' according to a university's advisor. What aspects of the topic were researched and how in existing literature, however, differed significantly across disciplines, e.g. policy studies, applied linguistics, higher education and comparative education, those fields in which the team members situate themselves. Collaborating with team members coming from mixed fields, the P.I. and some team members faced an identity conflict. They had to deal with the approaches, discourses, and literature that they were not necessarily familiar with to create a cohesive project, without compromising their respective disciplinary standards. Those who have completed a government-funded project knew that, if funded, the project would dominate the direction of their research for the next few years, while the chosen aspects or approach may not be recognised in their discipline.

Such awareness, for instance, made the P.I. feel uncomfortable, as she had to turn off her critical linguist sensitivities, a very significant part of herself, considering the macro-level focus of the project. In addition, with the mismatch between the felt urgency to master the literature of key disciplines where the NEP is drawing attention, and the actual, unsatisfactory pace, she developed a sense of inadequacy during the initial stage of the project. This is captured in a text chat between the P.I. and her mentor at the university:

> P.I.: I feel I am inadequate as I have battles in a faraway land.
>
> Mentor: Stay within your ZPD [Zone of Proximal Development].
>
> P.I.: I have no ZPD.
>
> Mentor: In your mind.
>
> P.I.: With a slight touch or blow, I get scattered around, and try to build and build.

The neoliberal context brings up new and more complex problems that researchers cannot keep ignoring, which are potentially more fundable. In pursuing these, academics are pressured to reach beyond their zone of comfort concerning their familiar theories and approaches.

What is interesting is that, toward the end of the project, the P.I. started to feel more confident with her emergent interdisciplinary identity with a new balancing point among her multiple disciplinary identities, which started to be reflected in her self-introduction in her online profiles. This was in part due to the external endorsement of it such as consultancy she was asked to do. During the identity drift and recrafting, what anchored her was the very fact that the mentor and the benevolent senior member of the project team would make themselves available when asked, to provide their advice and encouragement that put matters in perspective.

Collaboration-led relationship building

While often multinational teams are built out of existing relationships, to increase the chance of securing funds, the team members who were mostly just acquaintances or strangers opted to take the journey together. The team was created considering the diversity concerning the stages of the NEP phenomenon, from cases (or education systems) where privatisation was emerging to ones where institutionalised stability was observed. This choice is consistent with previous studies on reforms which show that the degree of reform maturity affects the perceptions and impact of reforms (e.g. Choi 2018). This project led team members to step into uncharted areas, working with strangers, as one team leader noted, referring to her own national group:

> We have no experience of working as a team as all of us are affiliated with different institutions scattered around the country. We know what others are doing well through research articles, meetings and talking at conferences or some study groups … I had very little knowledge about the research the other team members had been doing.

Embarking on the journey with new colleagues required learning about each other's working styles and ways of communication. The discretion and sincerity to promise only what one can honour can be misunderstood as unwillingness to commit, before one realises that the other does more than what was promised, for instance. As in any new relationship, giving considerable allowances to each other, trusting each other's best intentions, disregarding unintended offences, and being patient kept the team moving toward the goal.

Responding to internal review comments as disparate teams under pressure

From an internal review, the proposal received feedback that the project was overly ambitious. The suggestion to narrow down the focus made sense, but it also posed challenges. A couple of reviewers suggested choosing English as the case subject rather than investigating NEP in general, on the argument that the track record of the P.I. on related topics would increase the chance of the proposal being funded. Also, the subject choice would help better capture the school-level impacts of NEP.

After considerable deliberation, the suggestion was accepted by the different regional teams. What weighed most in the decision was the research gap in the literature and its scientific importance, as well as its implications for equity and justice, which was the team members' common concern. But it was also accepted on the pragmatic argument that focusing on ESOL provision would potentially raise the impact of the research, which today is one of the main, explicit, criteria used to assess a research proposal.

More specifically, two other teams (the Australian and Japanese) agreed with this new focus, as English is often the subject which affects the academic trajectories of students – as is also the case for Hong Kong. When this new focus was suggested, however, the Greek team objected. English is not a priority topic when exploring the extent of privatisation in the school education system, an emergent phenomenon in that country, and its implications for equity. After lengthy negotiations, the team agreed to sacrifice their individual research interests for the interests of the entire team, as there was still a strong and, in the end, convincing argument that as a *lingua franca* in globalised societies (Dearden 2015), English, often in indirect and invisible ways, affects students' trajectories within the schooling system (e.g. in the Greek case, participation in Erasmus projects and in the education work of the EU). However, this somewhat imposed focus on English was a constant source of difficulties and challenges for the team. For example, the team had to investigate the emergence of the phenomenon of privatisation of public education in more general terms, while at the same time exploring the more specific topic of NEP in ESOL, a requirement which stretched the financial and human resources available to the researchers.

A major challenge was posed when the team opted not to reflect one internal reviewer's suggestion. As is the case for feedback on any academic work, the comments and recommendations can be contradictory. Therefore, the team have to decide which feedback to accept or reject and how to respond to the feedback. For the focal case, during the final institutional review, one of the senior internal reviewers gave 'major corrections' and recommended quite a number of substantial revisions involving considerable restructuring, while all the others suggested only textual or minor corrections. The team declined the suggestion. This created agony for the PI as the proposal could have been denied submission. Early career researchers are often expected to 'listen to the sage advice of senior colleagues … irrespective of' the soundness of the given advice (Petersen 2016, 111).

Disagreements were also provoked by the different assumptions held by individual researchers or regional teams regarding the purpose of the research when crafting the bid text at the final stage. Underlying the political and/or scientific and epistemological issues was, of course, the problem of comparability and the underpinning issue of what was being compared across contexts. As the literature indicates (Law 2007, 357), comparing a curricular and educational change process across polities requires integrating the purpose of comparison and capturing the dynamic phenomena rooted in hierarchically nested systems, which may occur differently, thus defy mechanically mapping the phenomenon using a rigid framework.

The P.I. wrote the proposal with the funding context in mind. When regional leaders gave feedback, given the high stakes of the endeavour, each suggestion, even concerning one word, was carefully weighed with the funders in mind. The challenge involved is well illustrated in the chain of emails among the research team on one of the research objectives, namely 'ensuring the appropriateness of NEP in public school systems'. The Australian team suggested rephrasing it as 'by investigating its appropriateness'. The following discussion ensued:

> *P.I.: I am a bit hesitant to adopt what is suggested, as it sounds, to me, as if we can drive NEP out of the public school system. The previous rendition acknowledges its existence and aims to figure out how to manage it to make sure that the practice is appropriate.*
>
> *Australian leader: I understand what you are saying as well, but the differing contexts may be positioned differently as well in our 'relationship' with TESOL NEPs. In our context, we need to better understand what is happening, and how it is happening and identify problems with it – it feels as though in your context, it may be a fait accompli, and so it needs to be made sense of and perhaps best practice highlighted. The project may need a scope for both possibilities.*

Such different stances sometimes led the team members to wonder if the bid as one team should proceed. After all, the team decided to continue the bidding, and the expression was revised in the next rendition of the proposal as 'by investigating its appropriate use', in order to represent both contexts. Keeping all matters and decisions transparent and collective, the openness to the negotiation and willingness to meet in the mid-ground helped the team to submit the bid.

Project management against the neoliberal climate

The tension between an inflexible project management system and the organic nature of research

One of the challenges for the project was methodology, which emerged as an issue after funding was secured. Funders often allow little scope for flexibility when a successful international application is actioned. Each team is allowed to accommodate its own site-specificity in investigation, but at the same time abide by the stringent requirements of the grant conditions. This challenge is not a problem of researchers' naivety, but an inevitable issue, which requires experienced researchers on the team to help navigate. For our team, once the funds were secured, the detailed methodology had to be negotiated, especially in terms of data to be collected. For instance, difficulties were encountered in making decisions around the differences in background knowledge and enactment of the phenomenon in different national settings, but exacerbated by the expectation or pressure to appear consistent in the eyes of the research reports' evaluators. For example, in Australia, the leader had to engage in a lengthy, multiple-meeting negotiation with the state education authority, which gatekeeps access to schools for conducting research. The access was granted after reformulating some of the questions in the interview schedule, as the authority deemed the original format unsuitable to the research interests of the department. The Japanese team were also repeatedly denied access to schools from the Boards of Education (BoE), which previously agreed to provide access, in consideration of the COVID-induced disruptions of schooling. Also, after analysing data from case studies, the Japanese team initially proposed not to conduct the survey in Japan, thinking it to be not relevant when major decisions are made at the BoE.[2]

These matters caused anxiety to the PI. The funding agency assumes that everything in the research process is smooth and predictable. However, instances like the ones described here suggest that dealing with issues arising from the translation of the research agenda and tools that were created to suit the funding context inevitably creates problems (e.g. violations of academic freedom by another government, constant reviews of the research method with the evolution of the study), which require time, effort and compromises on the part of the research teams. While the PI is given the opportunity to justify to funders any 'inconsistency', the assumption seems to be that the project has to be completed as envisaged/described when applying for funding, otherwise the funder would see it as unsuccessful, especially if some teams cannot deliver what has been promised (as in the case of Japan). However, such variations may attest to the sincerity of the team, rather than their negligence or breaking of the research contract. In fact, such sincerity was what delayed the process but also enabled the project to continue despite the pandemic and complexities arising from the multi-context investigation, as the segments of emails below show:

> Too many emails, apologies. I just want to say thank you for the thorough review of the survey draft. The comments reflect mainly (a) differences in the national settings and (b) differences in the role of English in the different contexts … I now realise that it would have helped if we had included a cover letter in the survey. It is obvious that we need to do a lot of work on this, so it seems that it is not possible to distribute the survey this school year. I have a meeting with the [national] team in a couple of days so I will come back to you about your suggestion to have a Skype meeting exclusively on that before our already scheduled meeting. (Greek team leader)

> Hello, and I do apologise for this Saturday email – but I wanted to get the draft survey to you before our meeting on Monday and I hope you will have time to glance at it on Monday, or I am happy to talk to it at the meeting. I feel that in our last meeting, I did not sufficiently acknowledge the extensive work of the Greek team in preparing early drafts of the survey, and I hope you will see that I have tried to incorporate your work in this version more fully. I have set the survey up on a spreadsheet, which I hope will be fairly self-explanatory, and have done this to try to get around the challenges associated with our very different sites. (Australian team leader)

> It is worth noting that the survey-building process lasted for about eight months, a fact which could not have been anticipated. While for the P.I. this meant more pressure and work to justify to funders the slippage in the project timetable, the atmosphere where everyone felt they could voice concerns and that their views would be listened to, and the knowledge that the rigour of the research was ensured through the lengthy debates, negotiation and reiteration, kept the team members invested and committed to the project.

Shifting the locus of leadership as the project evolved

The bidding created interesting power dynamics among the collaborators in relation to access to the explicit or often unwritten rules of the game, which unsettled the usual power structures. The P.I. was junior to some of the regional team leaders in terms of the career stage and /or research experience regarding the NEP thread of the research when the bid was under development. However, due to the P.I.'s track record of successful grant bidding and the knowledge of the context where the bid was to be submitted, she became the functional leader.

The dynamics among the members, however, were to be disrupted once the project started. Now that the project has started, the locus of leadership does not concern grant securement, but managing the project and the team. Thus, as the project evolved, one of the regional team leaders became the de facto advisor and mentor for the P.I. in managing the project, as she was willing to share her insights and experience regarding the arising or potential issues. When the team was experiencing an impasse, she could offer practical solutions or push other members.

With the shift of power dynamics and distributed expertise, members had to make extra efforts to keep the project afloat, by sharing their expertise regularly. However, this was challenging, as each was under pressure to manage other commitments which were equally demanding their performativity and accountability acts. Setting concrete goals, dividing those into small achievable units of actions with deadlines, allocating roles, and adjusting expectations toward each other, all through honest negotiation, enabled the team to produce deliverables against the hyper-competitive, overly demanding neoliberal context.

Differential pressure to perform across contexts vs. measurable output-driven monitoring

Managerial accountability creates an additional, sizable tension around reporting, especially for the P.I., with universities and academics being turned into 'auditable subjects' by funding agencies (Boden and Epstein 2006). In the funding context of Hong Kong, the grants council penalises the university as well as the staff who 'ineffectively' manage a project. For instance, for every dollar unspent, the same amount of penalty is charged to the host university. Each university, entrusted to monitor the funded projects, establishes its own audit and monitoring system, involving the head of the department where the grantee works. The applicant's head has to evaluate in one-page written comments and endorse all regular grant reports, before their submission to the university's research management unit. This pressures the P.I., as the research management is considered a part of staff's contract renewal or promotion. The university research unit then assesses their appropriateness before they are reviewed by the senior management. Only after these processes are reports formally submitted to the Grants Council, where they are finally assessed. Any changes (e.g. design, budget, schedule) must secure approval before they are implemented, through the same procedure, otherwise the P.I. and the university are held accountable.

Due to the pandemic, the research schedule was significantly delayed with all funded research, and the funding agency granted the requested extension; however, the due dates of the reports did not change accordingly. Mid-term reporting is of high stakes, as it affects the release of subsequent funding. When the Japanese team faced a dead-end in data collection due to the pandemic, the team had to spend considerable time and effort exploring alternatives and proving that the team had done their utmost, adding additional pressure. The evaluation of the success of the project in Hong Kong, like much other funded research, is made not just in terms of actual collaboration, but also measurable achievements, i.e. international refereed conferences and publications in journals recognised by the university (e.g. SSCI or ESCI, or Scimago Q1 Q2 only). Pressure also resulted from the fact that all promised conference presentations and publications have to be completed within the timeline of one year after the end date of the study. Outputs needed to be forthcoming, if not published. The usual duration of general research projects in the context is two to three years, thus the promised publications must be out within the timeframe of three to four years. This timeframe set by the managerial accountability is highly pressured, considering the amount of work required in producing quality outputs as well as research engagement as an international team as illustrated before.

The fact that the evaluation criteria of the outcomes are not always explicit, but the progress is minutely assessed, adds to the pressure. The intermediate and final reports are assessed on eight criteria, including significance of output (e.g. quality and quantity of books, journal papers, conference proceedings), value of results, and publicity. This is done on a scale of four levels, from 'failed' to 'exceeded', which will then be summed up in three levels of assessment: satisfactory, barely satisfactory and unsatisfactory. With no explicit conversion formula from the outcome of individual criteria to the final assessment, the researchers feel pressured to perform as much as they can. This evaluation conundrum, analogous to the one that urges teachers in schools and classrooms to always improve their performance no matter where they stand (improvement for improvement's sake) (Simons 2015), is the best illustration of how performativity works to control the minute activities of the researchers. Under a culture of performativity, one must continually be seen to perform (Ball 2003). Likewise, researchers engage in self-imposed exploitation and overwork, for fear of failing to pass the evaluation–an unlimited personal investment which is often observed in output-oriented research management systems (Petersen 2016).

Besides, carrying out an international study means experiencing the different 'temperatures' of performativity across contexts. If the team members were all coming from the same context, managerial accountability would be felt in a similar way or at least its terms would be understood. Though performativity is the regulative principle in HE sectors globally, there are different degrees of freedom at national, institutional and individual levels, and differing levels of institutional support, as noted by Wagner and Leydesdorff (2005). At the individual level, this depends on an academic's tenure status, career stage, as well as his/her values. Some will resist as much as possible the pressure to perform, taking responsibility for the potential consequences such a stance entails, which might be non-tenured and precarious employment; other academics will enter competitive games on the understanding that performance management is part of them; still others will embrace fully the performativity imperative as the new 'normal' of doing research. Teams based in different policy contexts may be able to strike a balance at different points in the time of the project between the 'freedom' to focus on genuine and substantive research interests (here, issues of equality and justice) versus 'deliverables'. For instance, of the focal team, Japanese and Greek teams have more autonomy in terms of the pressure to publish in high-ranking journals, whereas, in Hong Kong, publications with journals below Scimago Q2 or ESCI are not counted toward outputs, both at personal and institution levels. The situation in Australia is similar. In our case, the P.I. felt pressured to start preparing comparative publications even with only preliminary findings, and despite the differential progress with the research across teams.

What helped the team to persevere was the meta-analysis of the team's interrelationship, as well as conducting the research. For instance, the Greek team leader helped the P.I. see the issue by honest advice:

> My impression is that people were a bit frustrated in the meeting yesterday. My advice would be to be more careful in what you are asking from the other teams of the project … I think you shouldn't ask us to contribute equally and have the same level of responsibility for how the project develops … . So, overall my advice would be (1) to try methodically and without pressurising people to achieve the deliverables, one by one, 2. to allow people space to do their own part of the research … and 3. to create opportunities for discussing actually substantial research issues arising out of this joint project.

Openly discussing issues around the relationship among the research members in addition to the work will help them reach the completion of the project.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has presented and discussed snapshots of a grant proposal development and initial implementation by a research team involving sub-teams across four geographical, socio-political and national policy contexts, closely monitored by a performativity-oriented, managerial accountability system. Our methodology of reflective co-writing, which was substantiated by the collated written correspondence, has enabled us to exemplify the impact of currently dominant policies of internationalisation of HE institutions on developing international funding bids involving international research teams.

The paper contributes to both critical approaches to policies on (neoliberal) internationalisation of HE and research performativity and managerial accountability literature, by investigating the impact of the entanglement of the two on research and researchers. It is the entanglement of these two global trends, often assumed but not explicitly addressed in the existing literature, that creates the conditions framing research in the present era. Previous critical studies have examined how the neoliberal discourse has changed the being and doing of HE in a cultural context (e.g. Tang and Zhang 2023) or a national context (Takayama 2009). Some others have investigated how it is interpreted and translated into performativity measures (e.g. Ball 2012) or research governance (e.g. Buckner 2020) in the global context. Others explored the internationalisation of HE in a specific national context (e.g. Alexiadou and Rönnberg 2022). They have not studied how these affected researchers' day-to-day decision-making and execution, what aspects of our research activities can be compromised or at such risk, and how the international team members can learn to live at the intersection of the two neoliberal trends, i.e. internationalisation and the higher education governance via performativity and accountability mechanisms, to defend what is dear to us as researchers (Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

In discussing the process through which the object of research of this comparative study was delineated and the methodology developed, the study confirms previous findings that researchers choose a research agenda that promises funding and other financial revenues (Desierto and Maio 2020). It goes a step further by further shedding light on the problems arising in the development and execution of a research proposal that was submitted for a competitive grant and was successful: comparative studies are conducted in a more compromised way, at the cost of individual interests, precision of focus, sharing data and reporting on analyses prematurely, and perhaps spreading ourselves too thin. The hidden emotional cost of managing and completing an international project against all odds is another matter which requires attention.

What our study originally documents are the vicarious experiences of the tensions between the pressure to perform and pursue genuine research interests, as an international collaborative team formed in a relatively short time and many of its members have not worked together previously, as is the case with our research project. Team members will have to learn of and navigate through different cultural, systemic and personal assumptions, and build good relationships and trust while doing the research itself. The efforts to foster such relationships, necessary in collaborative work, within the period of a funded project can also be hindered by time zone differences and hemispheric differences in university and country (i.e. school) calendars. Furthermore, the imperatives to meet deadlines and produce convincing accountability reports might not be equally relevant to all teams and, therefore, might put unwelcome pressure on some team members potentially marring the team spirit, especially considering the short time frame (Kosmützky 2018). This way, we offer a nuanced understanding of the common engagement of research internationalisation in the neoliberal climate of questing excellence without a soul.

Our reflection provides some hope against such malady by providing some strategies and workings which helped maintain the integrity of the research. It highlights the crucial role played by mentors and senior members of an international team conducting funded research formed under a performativity regime and regulated by neoliberal accountability measures. A team which was formed in a rushed way, not built on previous relationships, would need time to learn about each other, such as work style, assumptions, and career goals, which requires patience and trust in the best intentions. For such team building, post-funding is facilitated by transparency and openness for negotiation, and most importantly, their commitment to valuable research. It also shows that reflective co-writing might be an occasion as well as a method for researchers to revisit the purpose of their research, to rethink the ideas of comparability and rigour when doing comparative work, to analyse and discuss what drives us as researchers, and to enable valuable opportunities for genuine team building. We hope this co-reflective narrative will help scholars make informed decisions in their efforts to strike a balance between prioritising a funding opportunity and doing research out of scientific interest and the highest quality in international collaborative research projects.

It is the case that the pressure to perform leads researchers to form international relationships and to look for opportunities to develop research projects that will be more rigorous to be competitive (though see related research findings in Yemini 2021). But it is also the case that individuals who are not trained or supported to conduct these projects may have to learn the skills the hard way, or they may break. Higher educational institutions and funding bodies may want to consider supporting such endeavours to conduct international projects through awareness-raising, giving more leeway and training, and a more relaxed timeframe as far as is feasible. In this high-pressure climate, winning in a competitive bidding situation involving international collaborators undoubtedly confers distinction upon a researcher, helping them sustain and advance their careers. But it is also important to review, and frequently so, the implications of research performativity and managerial accountability and commit to ultimately remaining true to genuine research intentions.

Notes

1. This procedure applies to other contexts such as Australia.
2. The team after all decided to conduct the survey with some changes in the questions.

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Appendix. Prompt for reflection on our collaborative research

1. What has led you to join the present comparative study (GRF)?
2. What is your role within the team?
3. What was your initial idea of the research topic, what were some issues or concerns you wanted to address?
4. What did you decide to compare and why as a team, and what do you feel about this?
5. How did you reach a consensus or why did you agree to the selected focus of the study?
6. How was the research focus decided (whether it is the ESOL or New Education Privatisation) decided?
7. How were the RQs decided? Any issues?
8. Why did you decide to collect the data you said you would collect?
9. What do you think about the research tools?
10. Any other constraints and issues that you faced in developing this comparative project?
11. Any suggestions for a new team to embark on developing a new project, drawing on your experience with this and other international projects?