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International research partnerships and cross-cultural project management: a Vietnamese beef cattle agribusiness autoethnographic case study

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Introduction: This case study explores enablers and barriers that contribute to the successful implementation of a complex official development assistance (ODA) research project, focusing on a multiyear research project aimed at integrating smallholder households and farm production systems into commercial beef supply chains in Vietnam. Researchers from diverse institutions in two countries have worked together over time to implement project activities that have involved local governments and private stakeholders.

Methods: This qualitative research uses an autoethnographic case study approach to explore the enablers, barriers and collaborative dynamics of an international research partnership. Through collective sense-making, our international and multicultural research group collaboratively interpreted our experiences of working together on a multi-year project that aims to investigate new collaborative approaches between smallholder farming households and commercial intensive agricultural systems with a focus on beef supply chains in northern Vietnam.

Results: Transdisciplinary research conducted by a multicultural research team required engagement across sociocultural, institutional and relational layers or boundaries. Key factors contributing to success included long-term relationship building and trust, distributed and culturally sensitive leadership, multi-level communication systems, methodological pluralism and shared problem framing.

Discussion: A design and evaluation framework is presented to assist researchers to plan, design, modify and evaluate their international projects. Lessons from this case study provide insights into managing interdisciplinary and intercultural collaborations and improving the effectiveness of international research partnerships.

KEYWORDS

Australia, beef supply chains, cross-cultural collaboration, diagnostic matrix, interdisciplinary, international development research, project management, Vietnam

1 Introduction

International research collaborations have become increasingly important and common in recent years, driven by multiple factors. Universities and higher education institutions now prioritize such collaborations to improve their global rankings, attract students and secure access to increasingly competitive financial resources. Globalization along with advances in and reduced costs of communication technologies have made cross-border academic research cooperation more feasible and ubiquitous (Dusdal and Powell, 2021). Additionally, a shared commitment to global policy frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can motivate researchers worldwide to work together to tackle complex and wicked global challenges. Beyond practical reasons, there is also an inherent, mutual desire among researchers to contribute to knowledge production, which often involves connecting with the diverse expertise spread across institutions throughout the world (Yemini, 2021). In addition, knowledge co-production by both academics and non-academics has been recommended to address sustainability challenges (Goñi Mazzitelli, 2025; Norström et al., 2020).

More specific benefits of the widespread growth of international collaborations have been well documented. These include improvements in scientific quality, enhanced capacity building, and greater innovation (Dusdal and Powell, 2021; Guerrero Bote et al., 2013). Collaborative efforts have also been found to lead to higher-impact research outcomes, often measured in numbers of peer-reviewed, internationally coauthored papers (Adams, 2013; Lawani, 1986; Rigby and Edler, 2005; Specht et al., 2024). In addition, Pinho and Reeves (2021) have shown that global networks can facilitate the integration of complementary areas of expertise and skills, technologies, and perspectives.

However, the outcomes of international collaboration are uneven. Successes have been found to vary regionally (Farias Borges et al., 2025) raising the issue of global north/south power dynamics (Lee et al., 2023). In addition, some disciplines, such as physics and medicine, have benefited more than others; moreover, the outcomes of international collaboration arrangements. As such, it should be noted that these collaborations can come with significant challenges (Kroll, 2025). For example, the administrative complexity of coordinating multiple institutions and stakeholders across different countries and cultures can require extensive effort and resources to manage. Intercultural and communicative hurdles such as navigating different communication styles, time zones and languages (Auanassova, 2023; Châteaureynaud et al., 2023; Dziewanowska et al., 2019; McWha et al., 2012; Specht et al., 2024; Vangen, 2017) can also occur. Uneven or differential access to technologies, library resources and capacity building can slow information sharing, data collection and data analysis. These challenges can affect the efficiency and equity of collaborative research but are increasingly addressed through intentional team management and technological solutions (Bammer, 2008; de Grijis, 2015). There has been limited literature published that explores relational and communicative group dynamics (i.e., collaboration, intercultural communication, power relations) of the teams doing this work, especially in Vietnam. Most peer-reviewed papers focused on official development assistance (ODA) for agriculture tend to address the impacts of agricultural development (Nhat Lam Duyen et al., 2021; Palis, 2010; Van Der Heijden, 2024), innovation adaptation (Kosmowski et al., 2024) or institutional collaborations (Hall et al.,

2003) rather than the nuanced functioning of the research teams themselves.

Our research questions are:

- How do international, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural research teams collaborate, navigate, negotiate diverse perspectives and adapt during ODA agricultural research?
- What practices, enablers, and barriers shape effective team functioning and reflexive processes in multinational ODA agricultural research collaborations, particularly in the Vietnamese context?

This paper will address these questions through an autoethnographic study of a Vietnam-Australia beef supply chain project, drawing on collective sense-making from team reflections. It is anticipated that drawing together and sharing practical learnings from this study may inform future international, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural research collaborations.

2 Background

2.1 International agricultural research partnerships

Like international collaborations in general, international agricultural research for development increasingly relies on equitable and well-managed partnerships to address global environmental challenges that affect agriculture such as food security, climate change and sustainable development (Lynam et al., 2024). Because these issues often transcend political boundaries, it becomes practical to have an international approach to solving these problems. As such, research on enablers and barriers in interdisciplinary and intercultural research partnerships within ODA agricultural projects has emerged as a key area of research (Byerlee and Dubin, 2009; Kuniyasu and Onimaru, 2005; Pardey et al., 2006; Snijder et al., 2023) over recent decades. The field of ODA partnerships has evolved from focusing on isolated disciplinary efforts to embracing interdisciplinarity and international collaborations that integrate diverse knowledge systems and stakeholder perspectives (Perz et al., 2010; Pischke et al., 2017). Such partnerships are now seen as instrumental in finding solutions and creating innovation in agricultural research for development (AR4D). Research suggests that over half of public policy projects funded by donors can struggle to meet intended impacts without effective collaboration (Lynam et al., 2024; Van Der Heijden, 2024). Not only do these partnerships open doors to funding opportunities, but they also allow the leveraging of existing resources, facilitate capacity building and promote benefit sharing among partners from different cultural and disciplinary backgrounds.

2.2 ODA in Vietnam

Across Vietnam, ODA-funded agricultural research has helped to improve smallholder farmer livelihoods by supporting market access, productivity and diversification (Bich Tho and Umetsu, 2022). These programs and projects have also helped to build national research capacity and strengthen linkages between researchers and farmers, as well as helped to improve resilience to climate change, environmental degradation and biosecurity risks by introducing new technologies

and farming systems (ACIAR, 2024; Galli et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2024). These programs and projects increasingly prioritize collaborative, partnership-based approaches and often involve an interdisciplinary team of researchers from outside of Vietnam (ACIAR, 2024). Interestingly, many ODA agricultural research projects have been concentrated in Southern Vietnam, particularly in the Mekong Delta (e.g., Linh, 2023; Petersen and Hieu, 2022) although the project that is the focus of this paper takes place in northern and central Vietnam.

2.3 Interdisciplinarity in research

Collaboration amongst disciplines can take many forms. Transdisciplinary research extends beyond academia to incorporate non-academic stakeholders—practitioners, policymakers, and community members—as co-producers of knowledge, integrating diverse knowledge systems including experiential and indigenous knowledge (Lang et al., 2012; Pohl and Hadorn, 2007; Mauser et al., 2013). Stember (1991, p.6) described the various types of disciplinarity as follows: Intradisciplinary, “within disciplinary work”; cross-disciplinary, “viewing one discipline from the perspective of another”; multi-disciplinary “involving several disciplines that each provide a different perspective on a problem or issue”; interdisciplinary, “where integration of the contributions of several disciplines to a problem or issue is required”; and finally, transdisciplinary is the “unity of intellectual frameworks beyond the disciplinary perspectives.” More recently, and building on this typology, Cooke and Arlinghaus (2024) and Kark et al. (2015) describe the concept of cross-boundary research and collaboration. They recognize that many applied ecosystem science efforts span boundaries—political, socio-cultural, environmental—and present complex problems that benefit from collaboration across domains. This is especially relevant to our research where we are crossing political regions and borders; crossing industry sectors; crossing academic disciplines; and using contextual and local knowledge; addressing complex problems through collaboration across domains. This paper focuses on crossing boundaries specifically related to international research collaborations focusing on ODA in the Vietnamese context. The paper proceeds with methodology and then presents findings on barriers and enablers, followed by a design framework and suggestions for future research.

3 Methodology

3.1 Autoethnographic case study approach

This study is framed as an autoethnographic case study because it combines systematic reflection on the lived experiences of project participants (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis et al., 2011) and collaborative meaning-making among researchers (Chang et al., 2013) with analysis of a bounded case comprising the Vietnam-Australia beef cattle agribusiness project and the international research team responsible for its design, implementation and evaluation (Yin, 2018). Autoethnography is particularly well suited to our research because it uses systematic reflection (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis et al., 2011) on the lived experiences of the researchers embedded in the project to develop deep insights into the sociocultural, institutional, and relational contexts shaping the collaboration. Collaborative autoethnography extends this approach by bringing together multiple participants' experiences and

reflections through collective analysis and meaning-making (Chang et al., 2013). Using autoethnography to explore the enablers and barriers in international research partnerships captures complex interpersonal and intercultural dynamics often overlooked by other methods. Recent autoethnographic studies (e.g., Crowley et al., 2025; Dusdal and Powell, 2021; Elkington et al., 2024; Seggern et al., 2023) show that this approach works well in collaborative research contexts.

This study is framed as an autoethnographic case study because it combines systematic reflection on the lived experiences of project participants with analysis of a bounded research partnership. The bounded case examined is the Vietnam-Australia beef cattle agribusiness project and the international research team responsible for its design, implementation and evaluation. While the current project provides the primary focus of analysis, participants also drew on prior collaborative experiences where these informed the development of relationships, practices and understandings relevant to the current partnership. The authors are both researchers and participants within the case, contributing insider perspectives through facilitated reflection, collective sense-making and examination of project documentation. This approach allows exploration of how disciplinary, cultural, institutional and operational differences were experienced and negotiated in practice.

3.2 Case study context and setting

Through a multi-year project, our collective group examines collaborative approaches between smallholder farming households and commercial intensive agricultural systems with a focus on beef supply chains in northern Vietnam and field sites located in Hung Yen, Nghe An, Thanh Hoa and Quang Tri provinces. The interdisciplinary research team includes researchers from universities in Vietnam and Australia, government institutes, NGOs, and consultants across Hanoi, Hue, Hoi An and Tasmania. Many team members have lived or worked in a country other than their home country and speak more than one language, bringing a rich variety of cultural and disciplinary perspectives. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of agricultural supply chain analysis and integration, the research group includes academic researchers from a range of disciplines, including natural sciences, social sciences, policy specialists, economics and gender studies. The team was intentionally composed to include gender balance and demographic equity across age, career stage, and discipline, ensuring diverse perspectives enriched collaborative dynamics. Gender and age diversity within the team also contributes varied experiences and viewpoints, which in turn influence collaborative dynamics and further enrich the research process. Gender balance across the team required careful navigation of differing cultural expectations around women's leadership roles, particularly in fieldwork. Through distributed leadership arrangements and relational trust-building, female team members took lead roles in gender-sensitive activities (e.g., stakeholder mapping, focus group discussions), demonstrating how intentional equity practices can bridge cultural paradigms while leveraging diverse epistemic contributions. The intentional diversity of our team created rich but complex collaborative dynamics.

3.3 Data sources and collection

While some members of the research team have worked together over the past two decades, this autoethnographic case study was inspired by the group's most recent research project focused on

integrating smallholder farmers into Vietnam's commercial beef cattle supply chains. Evidence is primarily drawn from this most recent project but is supplemented by reflections on prior collaborative efforts. Data sources included project monitoring and evaluation outputs, communication records, knowledge exchange events, capacity building initiatives and documented group reflections.

Data collection relied on project documentation as well as facilitated group discussions involving project team members including guided team reflections (Trundle et al., 2025) on successes, barriers, and motivations experienced by the group. Participation varied across activities and over time, reflecting the evolving composition of the project team and the differing roles of team members throughout the project lifecycle. However, all authors contributed to the generation of reflections used in this study through participation in collective discussions, workshops, meetings, and/or reflective activities. The group also recognizes that previous research efforts have contributed to a foundation that has influenced the way the group interacts today. Seidl and Werle (2018) explain that groups evolve over time and describe how the changing composition of participants can affect the dynamics of collective sense-making. Our current collective group has maintained a shared vision for ethos and research direction, due to cumulative knowledge from past efforts, institutional memory and the continued engagement of key partners (Seidl and Werle, 2018).

3.4 Data analysis

Central to our data analysis approach was collective sense-making, or the process through which people give meaning to their combined experiences (Wi Beck and Linnér, 2021). Our research group collaboratively interpreted experiences, including challenges, achievements, enablers and barriers, through facilitated discussions and ongoing dialogue. Themes and concepts were refined through iterative reflection, discussion and consensus-building among participants, drawing on both lived experiences and project documentation. Differences in interpretation were explored through discussion and incorporated into the collective understanding presented in the findings.

Complementing this was the use of reflexivity. Different forms of reflexive practices are frequently used by researchers in a variety of fields to understand epistemological issues ranging from how one's social standing affects their capacity to know (Harding, 1986; Moreton-Robinson, 2013) to understanding the power dynamics of research (Ellis, 1999). In the case of this research, reflexivity was used to explore how our group's diverse backgrounds, institutional affiliations, and collaborative processes influence knowledge construction and ways of knowing as well as the interpretation of project outcomes. Reflection was also used to identify the specific barriers encountered in our international research group and the tools and strategies we have used to overcome them.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Finally, as with all qualitative research, it is important to consider the positionality of the researchers as participants in the study. In this case, the researchers are embedded within the international, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural research team that functions as the case in our research. This has required ongoing reflexivity to acknowledge how our own backgrounds,

experiences, and power relations shape data collection, interpretation, and interactions with team members. The embeddedness also offers valuable insider perspectives but also has required us as researchers to observe and be aware of this situation to manage potential biases and power dynamics responsibly.

4 Findings

In this autoethnographic case study, we identified four domains that required ongoing negotiation within the partnership: disciplinary and epistemic differences, cultural and linguistic differences, operational requirements, and communication and leadership practices. Team reflections showed that challenges within these domains were experienced across multiple nested layers, including personal, disciplinary, institutional and cultural dimensions. The following sections describe these domains, the challenges they presented, and the practices the team used to navigate them.

4.1 Diverse perspectives on success

Team reflections revealed diverse personal, institutional, and project success criteria. While we, as a team of individual academic and non-academic members, have committed to the project following a common vision of sustainable development and agreed specific objectives (outlined in the approved proposal), we are each approaching the project with our own individual, disciplinary, institutional, gender and cultural lenses. Acknowledging the team as a collection of individuals was an important first step in making the team function smoothly. From the start of our project, we have facilitated conversations regarding this. For example, we conducted a series of internal meetings, particularly the Knowledge Exchange Workshop in Vietnam in Year 1 (2023), where each partner group was asked to describe what success looked like to them. Each of us articulated our own needs and expectations. Through this exercise, it became clear that there were similarities, differences and complementarities. This can be seen in Table 1 with the varying perspectives on what personal, institutional and project needs are by institution. During the Knowledge Exchange Workshop, participants worked within institutional groups to discuss what success would look like for them. Responses were recorded on group flip charts and are therefore presented at the institutional-group level rather than attributed to individual participants. For example, personal success needs covered a broad range and included "opportunities, knowledge, skills" (VN1), "enhancing and exchanging knowledge, skills, capacity, building and participating in scientific networks" (VN2), "higher education, experiences, income, capacity building (experience, skills, etc), research network, new culture/area discovery, English improvement, local authorities' collaboration" (VN3) to "Cultural understanding, friendships and networks, professional development and learning..." (AU1 and AU2).

The diverse priorities shown in Table 1 required explicit negotiation from the beginning of the project. This established common ground in capacity building, shared leadership and policy impact across all partners and was foundational for subsequent boundary-crossing practices.

TABLE 1 Diverse success perspectives from knowledge exchange week in Hanoi, Vietnam.

Group	Personal needs	Institutional needs	Project needs
VN1	Opportunities to learn and apply new knowledge and skills	Strategies and operational mechanisms that strengthen the organisation; trusted partnerships	Human capacity development; strong leadership; consensus across partners
VN2	Enhancing and exchanging knowledge, skills and research capacity; building and participating in scientific networks	Contributing to [institutional] objectives and Vietnam's livestock industry; inspiring young and early-career researchers	Contributing to project objectives and overall success; building and connecting linkages with partners and stakeholders along the beef value chain; transferring and propagating project results
VN3	Higher education pathways; professional experiences; income; capacity-building experience and research skills; discovering new cultures and places; improving English; collaborating with local authorities	Capacity building for staff; institutional reputation; research and training collaboration; access to research funding	Capacity building and sustainability of outcomes; publications; research networks; policy impact at sector and local levels
AU1/AU2	Cultural understanding; friendships and professional networks; ongoing professional development and learning	Scholarly publications; supervision and mentoring roles; long-term partnerships and cross-disciplinary collaboration	Empowering partners and farmers (shift from passive to interactive engagement); real and demonstrable impact; knowledge exchange; PhD training and students returning in-country; innovative beef supply chain systems; "giving back" to the next generation
Common ground	Building capacity in communication, research, publishing and networking; developing career pathways through collaboration opportunities	Strategic development of each organisation's human resources and research capacity	Engaging and empowering partners in leadership, management and implementation; creating policy influence and tangible benefits for farmers, communities and industry

4.2 Disciplinary and epistemic challenges

The project team included academics and non-academics from diverse disciplines (economics, animal science, social science, governance & business, etc.), creating challenges in aligning worldviews. Where agribusiness/economics members saw economic inefficiency; social scientists identified community challenges. This disciplinary tension required explicit negotiation.

In our Knowledge Exchange initiative, as the results of many hours of intensive planning sessions of the preparation team, we made deliberate efforts to balance "participatory social research, qualitative data collection, and farming system needs analysis," and the workshop agenda included both qualitative and quantitative methods. This shows the need to span disciplinary boundaries between social science (participation, narrative, qualitative approaches) and applied natural and economic sciences (e.g., quantitative economic modeling). To promote interdisciplinary collaboration, substantial investment was made early in the project to understand shared expectations and reduce misalignment and miscommunication during later stages.

The interdisciplinary nature of our study on beef cattle value chain shows that there is no single approach to solving this problem to meet the research questions of the project. For this reason, the project team formed included experts from economics, animal science, social science, governance and business. Through the project-design and knowledge-exchange workshops, the team developed a shared Theory of Change that brought together perspectives from different disciplines. This methodological and epistemological pluralism supported more holistic approaches to project implementation and helped team members understand how their different disciplinary contributions could contribute to the project's objectives.

4.3 Cultural and linguistic differences

To better understand the layers of cultural complexity that our research team has needed to cross, it is helpful to compare cultural paradigms for the two main cultural systems present in this case: Vietnamese (primarily Confucian heritage culture¹) and Australian (primarily Anglo-Western constructivist). While there are some similarities, certain components of these two cultural paradigms are quite different. Table 2 uses Bachrach (2014) institutional model of culture as a starting point to compare and contrast different elements of both cultures, specifically looking at components relevant to this case context with a focus on research, learning and approaches to project management. In brief, Vietnam's cultural paradigm and approach to research and learning is centered around vertical specialization (i.e., language precision, rote pedagogy, single discipline institutions, which leads to a natural inclination for strong hierarchies in institutions) and Australia's is based on horizontal breadth (i.e., direct discourse, inquiry methods, multidisciplinary teams, which promote flatter relations and egalitarianism as an institutional default). These differing paradigms shaped collaboration dynamics across research design, project governance, and dissemination. While this table gives a macro level overview of the cultural differences, it should be noted that within our team, there are members from cultures other than Vietnamese and Australian. However, because the teams are functioning in the Vietnamese and Australian systems, for the purposes of this paper, we are choosing to explain the cultural differences at this level. It should also be noted that global collaboration is a relatively new practice in Vietnam starting in the 1990s when the Vietnamese

¹ Confucianism dominant in institutional settings; Buddhism, Taoism also contribute to Vietnamese culture.

TABLE 2 Cultural paradigm comparison for Vietnam and Australia with focus on education, research and project management.

Cultural component	Vietnam (Confucian heritage)	Australia (Anglo/Western constructivist)
Shared meanings/worldviews	Knowledge passed from teacher to learner, textual mastery (Ho, 2020; Huong, 2025)	Knowledge as co-constructed, self-reliance encouraged via inquiry (Harris et al., 2013; Joyce et al., 2009)
Values and moral order	Collectivism, harmony, hierarchy as virtue (Tran, 2023)	Autonomy, innovation, egalitarianism, “fair go”, meritocracy (Harris et al., 2013; Joyce et al., 2009)
Norms and roles	Vertical teacher-student deference; listen/memorize/reproduce, teacher-centred pedagogy (Ho, 2020; Huong, 2025)	Horizontal teacher-learned collaboration; student-centred pedagogy, question/debate, inquiry-based (Harris et al., 2013; Joyce et al., 2009)
Institutions	Single discipline universities and research institutes, specialized, bounded/focused expertise (Tran, 2023)	Multidisciplinary universities, cross-field integration and problem solving (Brooks et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2013)
Language role	Monosyllabic, supports culture valuing distinct meaning, deep knowledge in separate domains, deference (Huynh, 2025; Toan, 2023)	Polysyllabic, supports culture valuing elaboration, debate, breadth (Summerville et al., 2024; Whorf, 2012)
Transmission	Rote exams and discipline socialize hierarchy (Ho, 2020; Tran, 2023)	Group projects and inquiry socialize collaboration (Matsunaga et al., 2021)
Hierarchy fit	Hierarchy core value, top down (Vu, 2022)	Earned, more flat, normal and acceptable to challenge authority (Bassett, 2004; Hofstede, 1986, 1991, 2001)
Research paradigms	Applied/problem-solving research; technical solutions within state priorities; experimental/survey methods led by seniors common (Ho, 2020; Tran, 2023)	Hypothesis-driven inquiry; mixed/qualitative/participatory methods commonly used; reflexivity prioritized (Harris et al., 2013)
Project management	Top-down decisions by senior leaders; fixed plans; upward accountability; formal communication (Vu, 2022)	Distributed leadership; adaptive plans; horizontal accountability; direct feedback (Harris et al., 2013)
Dissemination	Through official channels via ministry reports, technical reports and recommendations	Through academic and public channels via peer-reviewed publications and impact narratives for diverse audiences (Harris et al., 2013)
Collaboration style	Relationship-oriented; trust built over time (Doan, 2022; Nguyen, 2005)	Task-oriented; trust built through performance (Sarros et al., 2005)

government began to encourage universities to take on research roles (Le Nguyen et al., 2023).

4.4 Operational boundaries

Team reflections and project documentation consistently identified operational requirements as an important area requiring negotiation across institutions and countries. Operational structures were another area of difference. Team reflections frequently highlighted diverse standards and requirements around human ethics, particularly as Vietnamese partners were unfamiliar with the Australian HREC requirements. Navigating this required the team to reach consensus and develop shared practices for research integrity, data management, and participant protection. The team agreed upon joint ethics protocols and standardized data management systems to ensure compliance with Australian human research ethics committee (HREC) requirements and Vietnamese institutional requirements while maintaining methodological flexibility. This created consistency and quality of data collection, management and storage. Through communication and leadership practices, a foundation was formed for sustainable collaboration.

Project documents and team reflections identified the participatory monitoring and evaluation (PMEL) plan as an important mechanism for maintaining focus and accountability and capturing project performance. It served as a guide that allowed for ongoing review and analysis of our activities throughout the project lifecycle. The purpose of the strategy was to outline and define the PMEL

requirements and define the program implementation objectives, participant outcome objectives and key evaluation questions. Indicators were co-developed by members from all institutions which contributed to a feeling of shared ownership and extended the learning to the broader team.

ODA project designs often have one institution responsible for one or more work packages, with staff conducting all activities associated with the work package. In the Vietnamese context, this allows budgets to be allocated, spending acquitted in-house, and clear reporting on objectives. However, in recognition of discipline expertise across partner institutions, each institution was allocated a field site to oversee and two disciplines to lead. A time and resource contribution from each institution was also budgeted to support other institutions leading other disciplines. Team reflections and project planning records identified role allocation and reporting responsibilities as an important operational challenge. A matrix was developed to ensure that all institutions could meet their reporting requirements on their individual leadership and oversight responsibilities as well as activities and disciplines they were supporting and contributing to that were led by other institutions.

Finally, Team reflections identified the selective use of external consultancies as a valuable operational practice. Instead of having external consultants conducting most of the research, which is common in ODA research projects, this project used consultants primarily for sense-checking, meeting facilitation and formal translation and interpretation services as needed. This allowed the team access to expertise but also allowed the team to engage more deeply with the

data and connect with stakeholders and local community members, strengthening relationships and trust.

4.5 Communication and leadership enablers

4.5.1 Long-term relationship building and trust

Team reflections consistently identified long-standing relationships and mutual trust as the most important foundations of this partnership's success. Over the past decade, many members of the research team have collaborated through previous ODA agricultural research projects, creating a shared history that has fostered deep familiarity with one another's working styles, disciplinary perspectives, institutional contexts and cultural expectations. This experience aligns with international collaboration literature, which consistently highlights enduring relationships and trust as central to sustaining effective cross-border research partnerships (Bozeman and Boardman, 2014; Dusdal and Powell, 2021). Such longstanding interactions enabled the team to engage openly with challenges, negotiate differences constructively, and adjust plans responsively when unforeseen circumstances emerged (Wöhlert, 2020). This approach explicitly acknowledged team members' prior knowledge and skills from past projects, building on established expertise rather than starting anew. It also made it easier for new team members to integrate quickly. Relational capital supported the smooth integration of new team members, who were introduced by trusted long term members, allowing the team to admit them quickly. New members were able to benefit from the preexisting network without needing to rebuild as much foundational trust.

Team reflections and project records suggested that these relationships influenced both internal team functioning and engagement with external stakeholders. In practical terms, the continuity created through earlier projects meant that team members no longer needed to invest substantial time in establishing credibility, building trust or clarifying basic expectations. Instead, their efforts could be directed toward methodological innovation, deeper stakeholder engagement and the strengthening of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary components of the project (Dusdal and Powell, 2021; Jeong and Choi, 2015). Importantly, these long-term relationships and trust networks extended beyond the core research team to include central and provincial government agencies, private-sector partners and local communities. Having experienced the professionalism and tangible benefits of previous ODA for agricultural research activities, these partners were willing, indeed often eager, to engage in subsequent phases of collaboration. This relational legacy constitutes a significant asset, enabling the current project to commence from a position of goodwill rather than skepticism and providing a stable platform for meaningful co-innovation and knowledge co-production. For example, Vietnamese partners' existing networks with provincial authorities and prior ODA project experience were explicitly acknowledged during project design workshops. Their established stakeholder relationships were prioritized for lead roles in fieldwork coordination, while intra-team relationship development was deliberately scheduled through dedicated team-building sessions before technical work began. Likewise, team members' academic and methodological knowledge were also acknowledged with cross-institution teams established by area of expertise and documented in project records. This leveraged prior skills and accelerated trust formation for all members.

4.5.2 Distributed and culturally sensitive leadership

Within the current project, a distributed leadership approach (Harris et al., 2022) was implemented. While the formal project leadership positions were established through the grant development and approval process, the operational leadership structure used during project implementation evolved through collaborative planning workshops involving Australian and Vietnamese partners. These discussions focused on institutional strengths, disciplinary expertise, stakeholder networks and local contextual knowledge, informing the allocation of coordination, facilitation and technical leadership roles across partner organisations. This approach enabled leadership responsibilities to be distributed across countries, institutions and disciplines while recognizing existing expertise and relationships. Operationally, leadership was not centered on a single principal investigator or institution but was distributed across Australian and Vietnamese partners and across different disciplinary backgrounds. Joint project leaders in both countries shared responsibility for strategic direction and administrative requirements (see Figure 1), while country-based project coordinators were responsible for coordinating activities, monitoring and evaluation processes, and facilitating team cohesion. This distributed leadership model performed several critical functions. First, it reduced the risk of dominance by any single institution or national perspective. Second, it created opportunities for team members to contribute to the project's direction through the rotation of facilitation roles in project meetings. Third, it ensured that project decisions were informed by local insights into cultural practices, political sensitivities, and institutional constraints. Importantly, the distributed leadership approach also supported effective mediation of social and cultural differences within the team. In addition, it promoted more equitable participation by early-career researchers, enabling junior team members to take initiative and develop skills in research design, facilitation, and stakeholder engagement.

Team reflections also highlighted that distributed leadership was not always interpreted or experienced in the same way by all participants. Expectations regarding authority, hierarchy and decision-making sometimes differed across institutional, disciplinary and cultural contexts. For example, while the project sought to promote shared leadership and distributed responsibility, some team members were more accustomed to hierarchical decision-making structures and therefore had different expectations regarding who should make final decisions and the extent of individual agency within a distributed leadership model. In practice, this required ongoing negotiation and clarification of roles and responsibilities. Although leadership responsibilities were distributed across the partnership, designated leaders in each country remained accountable for key decisions and project delivery requirements. Regular discussion of leadership responsibilities, transparent reporting structures and shared access to role-allocation matrices helped the team navigate these tensions and adapt leadership practices over time through ongoing reflection, learning and adjustments.

Finally, collaborative planning and joint fieldwork provided opportunities for the team members to work together. The authors' reflections suggest that these shared experiences helped establish communication norms and build trust across the team, which supported continued cross-cultural collaboration during implementation. For example, during project design workshops and the Year 1 Knowledge Exchange, the team co-developed and refined a Theory of Change framework mapping how

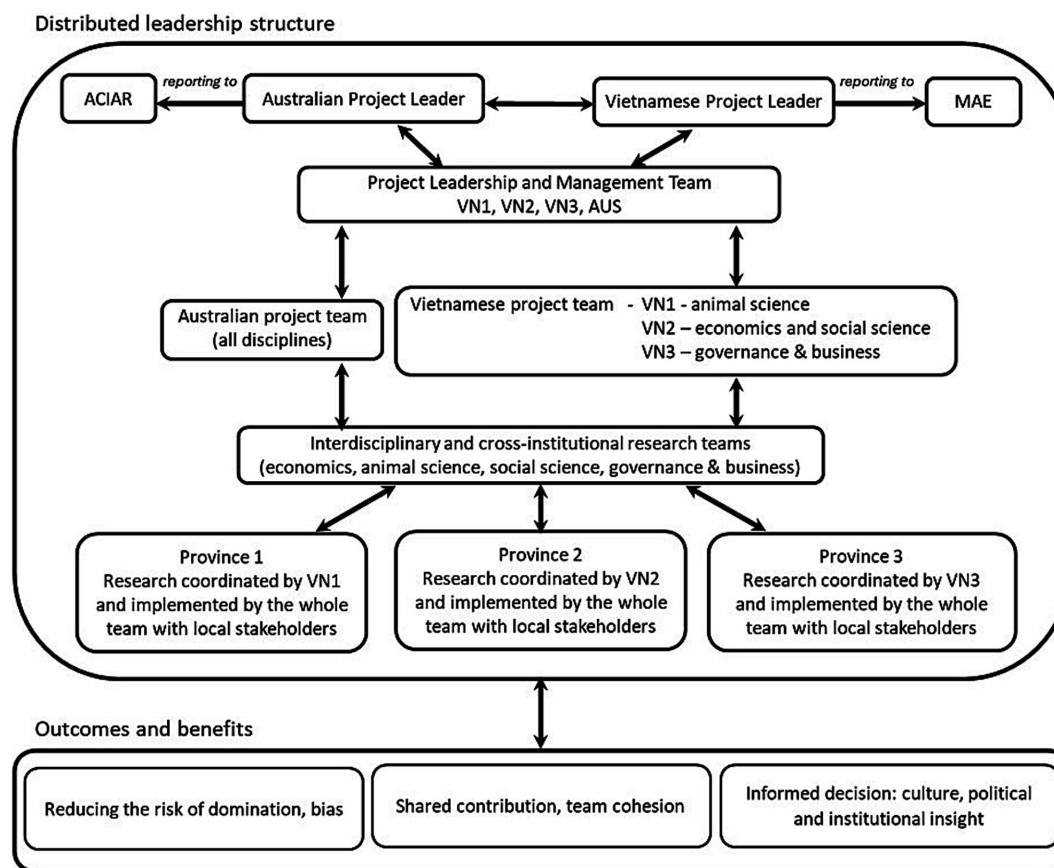


FIGURE 1

Distributed leadership structure and project organisation of the Vietnam–Australia beef cattle agribusiness project, showing leadership oversight of Australian and Vietnamese project teams delivering cross-institution, interdisciplinary research to geographically coordinated field sites. Each site is coordinated by a different Vietnamese institution (VN1–VN3) while drawing expertise from both national teams across economics, animal science, social science, and governance & business disciplines, contributing to reduced domination and bias, shared contribution and team cohesion, and more informed, context-sensitive decision making.

smallholder integration into commercial beef chains required bridging disciplinary silos (e.g., social science stakeholder mapping identifying actors and constraints, economic modeling estimating the implications of alternative integration pathways for those actors, and animal science, governance and social science interventions then designed to address the specific technical and institutional barriers revealed.). This shared visual roadmap aligned diverse epistemological approaches from the outset, preventing later miscommunication and grounding subsequent methodological pluralism. In addition, fieldwork sites included institutional site collaboration with multiple partner institutions per location (rather than one institution dominating each site), ensuring local contextual knowledge from diverse institutional perspectives informed data collection.

4.5.3 Multi-level communication systems

An effective communication system was a key factor influencing the success of research collaboration, particularly when project teams were geographically dispersed, culturally diverse, and working across different time zones. In this project, communication was intentionally designed to ensure transparency, support effective collaboration, and provide timely updates on project progress. A Program Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT) diagram was used to illustrate communication flows and established a comprehensive matrix specifying nine distinct communication modalities.

The PERT framework operated across multiple organizational levels. At the strategic tier, periodic reporting mechanisms addressed sponsor and stakeholder requirements through annual, mid-term, and end-of-project reports aligned with ACIAR contractual obligations. Monthly status meetings enabled project management oversight through face-to-face and conference call formats. The role of meeting chair for the monthly meetings rotated among partner institutions to promote shared leadership and provide all partners with opportunities to shape discussion and decision-making. Key meetings (e.g., monthly project meetings), involved team members and consultants who understood both Vietnamese and Australian professional contexts. According to the team's reflections, these individuals helped the team recognize and navigate differences in communication styles and working practices, and ultimately led to more inclusive and culturally sensitive team discussions. This helped to ensure fluency across both cultural paradigms (Table 2) for equitable participation and culturally nuanced discussions.

Operational communications encompassed weekly knowledge exchange meetings via Zoom for the Australian project team, supplemented by research design meetings convened as needed. Internal communications employed diverse channels including email, Facebook, Zalo, and LinkedIn to facilitate morale-building, sense-making, and problem-solving within sub-teams. External dissemination occurred through websites, social media, newsletters, academic journal articles, and farm notes, targeting Vietnamese farming communities alongside broader Australian

and Vietnamese audiences. These channels communicated milestones, research findings, and project outcomes at minimum twice-yearly intervals. In addition, because of the multilingual nature of the team, translation and interpretation arrangements included formal translators for key workshops, bilingual facilitation by team members during mixed-language meetings, specific seating arrangements during formal field meetings placing bilingual Vietnamese/English speakers with non-Vietnamese speakers and bilingual documents (English/Vietnamese) for all major reports and protocols, ensuring equitable access across linguistic boundaries. Google Translate and Zoom were often used spontaneously in both formal and informal meetings to provide translation as well, with non-Vietnamese speakers joining ad hoc Zoom meetings while attending in-person meetings to enable simultaneous translation while keeping it from being disruptive.

Finally, governance responsibilities were distributed between Project Co-Leaders, Project Manager, and Project Coordinator as accountable officers, with sub-team leaders bearing responsibility for delivery. Documentation was archived systematically on the Project MS Teams site, ensuring institutional memory and compliance. This structured communication system created a consistent rhythm of interaction, reduced misunderstandings during project implementation and allowed for adaptive adjustments to project activities in response to unexpected challenges. Team reflections revealed these challenges operated across nested personal, disciplinary, institutional, and cultural layers; this is shown in Figure 2 and described in the following paragraphs.

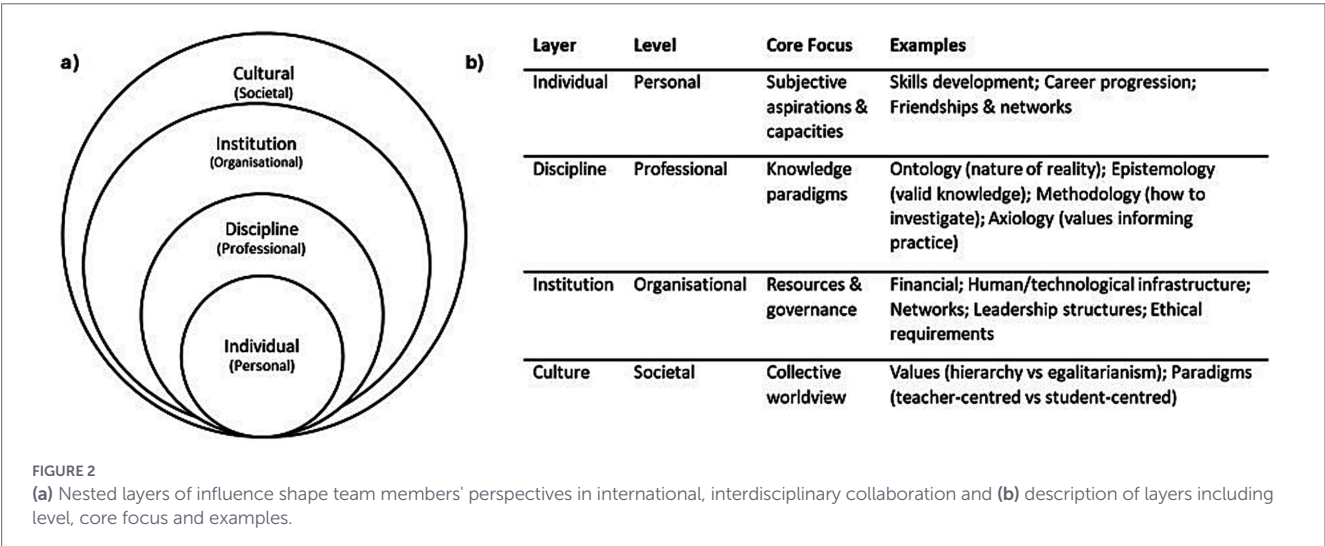
Nested layers and boundary-crossing in the project team International, interdisciplinary research teams must work across several forms of difference at the same time. These differences are not separate or linear; rather, they are nested across personal, disciplinary, institutional and cultural scales, shaping how team members understand project goals, contribute knowledge, negotiate decisions and solve problems. This aligns with Klaassen's (2020) discussion of layers and boundaries in interdisciplinary collaboration, where differences in knowledge, practice and institutional setting can influence knowledge integration, team negotiation and problem-solving. In our case, team reflections identified four nested layers that needed to be navigated: personal layers, including individual skills, career goals, relationships, age and gender; disciplinary layers, including ontology, epistemology, methodology and axiology; institutional layers, including resources, networks, leadership and ethics requirements; and cultural layers, including values and paradigms. We

use the term “boundary” to refer to the point at which differences between these layers become visible and require negotiation. For example, Australian HREC requirements created an institutional boundary because Vietnamese partners were less familiar with these processes, while Australian partners needed to ensure compliance with their own university systems. Crossing this boundary required the team to develop shared ethics protocols and data management practices that met formal requirements while remaining workable in the Vietnamese project context. These layers shaped how team members understood project aims, interpreted problems and contributed knowledge. Project documents and team reflections show that challenges most often emerged where aspirations, disciplinary paradigms, institutional resources and cultural values intersected. In this sense, boundaries were not only barriers, but practical points where collaboration had to be actively negotiated. The relationship between these nested layers is shown and described in Figure 2.

In addition to boundaries and layers, the research group identified collaboration practices that facilitated the crossing of boundaries including that can be grouped into three broad categories: structural, relational and skills and knowledge. It should be noted that these categories, while distinct, are not mutually exclusive and some practices contribute to more than one category. For the purposes of this paper, in those cases, the practice will be described in detail once and then mentioned again where appropriate.

5 Discussion

Our findings identified four domains requiring boundary-crossing practices: disciplinary and epistemic, cultural and linguistic, operations and communication and leadership. Consistent with literature on transdisciplinary transitions (Klein, 2017; Stokols et al., 2008), navigating these domains required specific boundary-crossing strategies. Team reflections suggested that these challenges were experienced across personal, disciplinary, institutional and cultural layers and addressed through structural, relational and skills-based practices. These empirical insights informed the development of a diagnostic matrix (Table 3) that operationalizes structural, relational, and capacity-building practices across disciplinary, cultural, operational, and communication domains. This framework translates



autoethnographic team reflections into actionable guidance for international research project design and evaluation.

The nature of contemporary research projects lies in the co-production of knowledge ng experiential and indigenous knowledto tackle the complexity of sustainability challenges (Goñi Mazzitelli, 2025; Norström et al., 2020). Hence, the four principles for knowledge co-production are context-based, pluralistic, goal-oriented, and interactive (Norström et al., 2020). However, it should be noted that the foundation of bi- or multi-lateral research agreements between countries often extends beyond knowledge generation to also include the generation of social capital (Skreli et al., 2024) through the facilitation of long-term partnerships, capacity building for researchers, managers and smallholders and improving livelihoods and human health (Australian Embassy in Vietnam, 2017).

It is also important to acknowledge that this collaboration operated within an ODA context shaped by Australian funding, contractual requirements and research governance systems. Australian ethics, reporting and accountability requirements influenced aspects of project design and implementation, while Vietnamese partners contributed critical contextual knowledge, stakeholder networks and local leadership that shaped field activities and project adaptation. Team reflections suggested that these different forms of influence

were not always experienced equally and occasionally required negotiation, particularly where institutional expectations, decision-making practices and reporting requirements differed. The distributed leadership model adopted by the project sought to recognize different forms of expertise and authority across institutions and countries. While such arrangements do not remove structural asymmetries that can exist within international development partnerships, they can provide opportunities for more equitable participation, shared decision-making and mutual learning.

Several practical lessons emerged from this case. First, effective international research partnerships require deliberate investment in relationship building, communication and trust, rather than assuming these will develop organically through project activities. Second, interdisciplinary and intercultural collaboration requires ongoing negotiation of differences in knowledge systems, institutional requirements and cultural expectations. This includes recognizing that communication, facilitation and engagement strategies may need to be adapted for different audiences and contexts. Third, successful collaboration requires teams to remain consciously transdisciplinary and transcultural throughout the entire project lifecycle, including project design, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and reflection, rather than treating these as considerations relevant only to specific activities. Fourth, distributed leadership and shared decision-making

TABLE 3 Diagnostic matrix that operationalizes structural, relational, and capacity-building practices across disciplinary, cultural, operational, and communication domains.

Collaboration domains Collaboration strategy category	Disciplinary and epistemic	Cultural and linguistic	Operational	Communication
Structure (formal arrangements, roles, etc.)	Interdisciplinary/ institutional site collaboration; Skills, resources and time matrix defined first by area of expertise rather than institution	Innovative translation/ interpretation services (formal + informal)	Design with Theory of Change; Distributed/shared leadership model; Structured PMEL component; Employ consultancies as needed; Gender balance commitment; Integrating institutional budgets and reporting; Allocation of time resources by institution	Multiple communication channels (formal and informal); Communication plan developed; Skilled facilitators with cross-cultural experience; Acknowledge implicit biases
Relational (trust, confidence, humility)	Capacity building (cross-discipline); Field trips/excursions; Foster development of early career researchers	Team members with cross-cultural experience, multi-lingual; Value emotional/ interpersonal skills; People with strong networks/connections/ social capital	Institutional site collaboration (not one institution per site); Promote demographic equity (gender, age, academic discipline)	Knowledge exchange opportunities (instead of one-way trainings); Skilled facilitators with cross-cultural experience
Skills and knowledge	Interdisciplinary capacity building (qual methods); Acknowledgement of prior knowledge and skills	Cultural bridging via networked team members (nationality, discipline, occupation)	Theory of change design PMEL learning loops	Informal knowledge sharing (extended shared travel, communal meals, etc.); Prioritize intra-team relationship development

can support more equitable participation, but require continual clarification of roles, responsibilities and accountability. Finally, successful collaboration depends not on eliminating differences, but on creating structures and processes that allow diverse perspectives to be recognized, negotiated and integrated throughout the project lifecycle. Team reflections also suggested that international, interdisciplinary and cross-cultural collaborations require substantially greater investment in planning, preparation, coordination and communication than more homogeneous teams, but that these additional investments can generate broader perspectives, stronger partnerships and more contextually informed outcomes.

To support the translation of our findings into effective international project management practice, especially in the development research space, we propose a practical diagnostic matrix. The columns are Collaboration Domains following our discussion of layers and boundaries: Disciplinary & Epistemic, Cultural & Linguistic, Operational, and Communication, encompassing personal, institutional and project-level dynamics. The rows represent collaboration strategies which emerged inductively from our team discussions: structural (formal arrangements), relational (interpersonal dynamics), and skills and knowledge (capacity development). While these categories emerged inductively, they are also consistent with concepts in the literature (e.g., Barker Scott and Manning, 2024; Kolm et al., 2024). Subsequently, cell intersections identify collaboration practices relevant to the project management, addressing domain-specific challenges.

This matrix can be used for project design, implementation and evaluation for international research collaborations. Teams may choose to discuss the extent to which individual practices are present within their collaboration and identify areas that may benefit from further attention or adaptation. While it was developed based on the findings from our particular context, it is hoped that the matrix can be transferred to other contexts as well. Breadth across domains is encouraged over depth in one domain. This encourages a smooth flow between domains. A project team can rate each characteristic/strategy from 1 to 3 with 1 (not addressed), 2 (present/developing) or 3 (present/well-addressed) for their project. Teams should strive to rate highly in both boundaries and characteristics and may use ratings to stimulate discussion and identify opportunities for reflection and improvement. A rating of one or two should be looked at as an opportunity for reflection and/or modification. The matrix was derived from the experiences of this case study and should be viewed as a heuristic framework rather than a validated assessment instrument. Future research could explore its applicability in other international research contexts.

Finally, it should be noted that there are limitations to this study. This body of works represents the experiences of this specific group of authors. It is possible that some perspectives are more strongly represented than others and that there may be confirmation or social-desirability biases present. While the authors all agree on the validity of the matrix based on their collective experience, as with all qualitative research, our findings may not be transferable beyond our context.

6 Conclusion

Researchers working in ODA projects have a mutual desire to improve the livelihoods of individuals, families and communities whilst contributing to knowledge production. However, that mutual desire is not automatically correlated with a mutual understanding or appreciation of how a team is enabled to collaborate in a project, or

how barriers are overcome. A true collaboration can only occur if there is recognition of diverse perspectives during ODA agricultural research, followed by a willingness of the project team to negotiate the diversity for mutual benefit and practical outcomes. Through our exploration of how international, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural research teams collaborate within our project, we have developed a framework that provides a practical reflective and diagnostic aid for identifying potentially useful practices across collaboration domains. Sensemaking of cultural differences and complementarities is also considered as part of the framework to ensure that all world views are recognized and affirmed.

Broader implications of the framework are that it transcends the complexity of intercultural, national, and disciplinary collaboration by helping a team navigate diverse goals and approaches, requiring open communication and adaptive design and management for maximum impact. Whilst the framework was developed in the context of beef supply chains in Vietnam, further research is needed to test the framework in other contexts as well as to explore the evolution of collaborative practices over time.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the data for this study consist of the authors' lived experiences, reflective narratives, facilitated discussions, and internal meeting notes generated through an autoethnographic research process. These materials are inherently identifiable and inseparable from the identities of the authors, and they contain sensitive and relational content that cannot be anonymised without compromising their integrity. In accordance with ethical guidelines for autoethnographic research and to protect author privacy, these materials are not publicly available. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to sarah.fischer@utas.edu.au.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by University of Tasmania Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

SF: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. LB: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. HD-N: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. KH-L-P: Formal analysis, Investigation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. HL-T-T: Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

HP-V: Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. NN-T-D: Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JT: Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. ON: Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. SI: Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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