Engaging or training sessional staff

Evidence from an Australian case of enhanced engagement and motivation in teaching delivery

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This paper examines the effectiveness of a programme of weekly meetings between sessional staff and the unit coordinator of a large first-year class at an Australian university. Interviews with sessional staff indicate that, in addition to training and targeted professional development initiatives, management initiatives that promote engagement matter for the motivation of individual sessional staff members and the overall quality and cohesiveness of course delivery. This result aligns with a key finding from the employee engagement literature, namely, that a local manager who is directly concerned with the day-to-day work of employees plays a crucial role in translating their knowledge and skills into high quality outcomes. In this instance, it is quality learning outcomes for undergraduate students. We discuss potential benefits and impediments to a serious focus on the employee engagement of sessional staff, which we contrast with the current focus within the higher education sector on generic training and skills development initiatives.

Introduction

Recent Australian higher education workforce statistics show that approximately 16 per cent of the university workforce comprises staff employed on a casual basis (DEEWR, 2011). Among the staff responsible for the provision of teaching, over 26 per cent were employed on casual (predominantly sessional) contracts in 2011 (uCube, the Australian Government's higher education statistics website, n.d.). The size of the contribution to teaching is much larger than these full time equivalent figures suggest, as it has been estimated that sessional staff are responsible for approximately 50 per cent of student teaching across the sector (see Percy *et al.*, 2008; Coates *et al.*, 2009; Coates & Goedegebuure, 2010). This level of contribution to teaching has been noted within the higher education literature and within universities.

The status of sessional staff as casualised, marginalised, contingent and peripheral has been noted (Kimber, 2003; Anderson, 2007; Percy & Beaumont, 2008; Brown *et al.*, 2010; Gottschalk & McEachern, 2010), as has the need for professional and teacher skills development (e.g. Watters *et al.*, 1996; Australian Universities Teaching Committee [AUTC], 2003a; AUTC, 2003b). There are also many entry-level induction and training programmes within universities (Percy *et al.*, 2008). For the most part, these programmes are centralised events that focus on learning and teaching knowledge and expertise (Brew *et al.*, 2011). They are not course- or discipline-specific, do not involve the unit coordinators with whom sessional staff work, and

tend to be one-off events, often set just before the start of a teaching semester. The obligation to attend them also varies across the sector.

The contribution of sessional staff to university teaching also brings to attention the task of unit coordination for course convenors. Unit coordination is one part of an academic teaching role, a role that is typically conceived of, and receives institutional recognition, as a research, teaching or administration role, with research uppermost in a hierarchy of value. In terms of the relationship between unit coordinators and the sessional staff they oversee, it is often unclear what constitutes leadership and what constitutes management. It is also unclear where the leadership and management who are involved in a unit coordinator's role sit in terms of the distinction between teaching and administration. Research to date has predominantly explored the supervisory relationship between unit coordinators and sessional staff in terms of leadership and mentoring capabilities rather than managerial capabilities and tasks (e.g. Roberts *et al.*, 2011; Lefoe *et al.*, 2011). This relationship is largely restricted to the potential for unit coordinators to contribute to the professional development of sessional staff through setting an example of good teaching practice. Within discussions of informal pathways for the professional development of sessional staff and discussions of their contribution as educators, there is also recognition of the social and informal aspects of the relationship between unit coordinators and sessional staff, as members of communities of practice (Percy & Beaumont, 2008; Warhurst, 2008).

Yet, framing the relationship between unit coordinators and sessional staff as a relationship between line managers and employees is not only under researched, but it also opens up the possibility of drawing insights from the management literature, particularly with reference to employee engagement and motivation. In this paper we adopt such an approach. Specifically, we explore whether the engagement of sessionally employed tutors can be enhanced by higher than usual levels of contact with, and informal management by, the unit coordinator with whom they work through a programme of weekly meetings to discuss content delivery, teaching strategies, and students' experiences of learning.

Despite the relatively small sample size of tutors who were interviewed, and the fact that the programme of weekly meetings was implemented in one undergraduate economics course with a single unit coordinator at one university, our findings suggest that regular contact and informal management by a unit coordinator is highly valued by tutors. Most importantly, we find that it substantially enhances their motivation and focus on student learning outcomes. We therefore recommend viewing effective line management of sessional staff by unit coordinators as a complementary tool to increase their engagement and students' learning outcomes. We also propose the advantage of clearly distinguishing between the management of sessional staff in discipline and context-specific situations from generic (or transferable) training initiatives for sessional staff aimed at teacher skills development.

Throughout the paper we employ the Recognition Enhancement Deveopment (RED) Report's definition of sessional staff as 'teachers, including any higher education instructors not in tenured or permanent positions, and employed on an hourly or honorary basis' (Percy *et al.*, 2008, p. 4), but exclusively focus on sessional staff working as tutors. We also identify as unit coordinators those operating as unit convenors, course or subject coordinators and lecturers in charge.

Our interview findings and subsequent discussion apply most directly to the traditional university teaching context, where unit coordinators in continuing employment have designated responsibility for course content, lecture delivery and assessment design, and where sessional staff are employed to conduct weekly tutorial classes and mark student assessments. We recognise that sessional staff perform other roles, but nevertheless regard this traditional divide between continuing staff, as unit coordinators, and sessionally employed staff, as tutors, to be most representative of current employment practice in the context of undergraduate courses with large student enrolments. Accordingly, our findings and discussion are most applicable to this context. No comment is made on whether the traditional lecture/tutorial divide does or does not promote good teaching practice. Our focus is the impact on and value of regular face to face meetings between unit coordinators and sessional tutoring staff from the perspective of the latter, rather than specific teaching practices *per se.* However, we note, the two are connected.

Background

Within many Australian universities, sessional staff are responsible for a great deal of face to face interaction with students through tutorials and consultations; they are also responsible for a high proportion of student assessment. It is likely that their engagement, motivation and skills are essential for the successful delivery of quality teaching, in particular, through the augmentation of lecture content within the context of the tutorials they deliver. In turn, it

is likely that disengagement, a lack of motivation, or inadequate skills on the part of sessional staff compromise student learning experiences and learning outcomes through suboptimal tutorial delivery. Unit coordinators are most closely situated to the day to day teaching work undertaken by sessional staff; accordingly, they are best placed to have an impact on at least some of the factors outlined.

The contact and informal management of sessional staff by a unit coordinator are characterised in terms of 'employee engagement' (Macleod & Clarke, 2009; 2010). We draw on the high profile *Macleod Report* commissioned by the UK government (Macleod & Clarke, 2009), which characterises effective line management in terms of regular coaching and feedback concerning work related goals. The report's authors suggest this is a key ffactor of employee engagement, one that distinguishes between organisations with high (as opposed to low) employee engagement – which, in turn, is highly correlated with team and organisational performance across a wide range of metrics. Employees within organisations with high levels of employee engagement are coached no less than once a week by their immediate or local manager. Regular coaching goes a long way to ensuring three work related outcomes: first, that goals are clearly established and well understood; second, that work done well is regularly acknowledged; and third, that problems are quickly identified and promptly addressed (Macleod & Clarke, 2009; 2010).

The weekly meetings

A unit coordinator with lecturing and overall responsibility for a large first year undergraduate course instituted a programme in which all tutors met with him as a group once a week. This was one of several initiatives aimed at addressing low lecture and tutorial attendance by students and a high student dropout rate; both of which indicate low student engagement. A motivation for instituting the weekly meetings with tutors came from the unit coordinator's positive experiences meeting with senior lecturing staff when he was employed as a tutor during his postgraduate candidature. Another motivation was a concern that a segment of the tutor cohort was disengaged from the course material and the learning needs of first year students.

Participation in the weekly meetings was voluntary, and attendance was paid at the rate for consultation and marking. The focus of the meetings was the week by week progress and engagement of students. The unit coordinator would ask about the previous several weeks of tutorials, enquire about student attendance, comments and complaints, and ask the tutors for their assessment of the students' understanding of and engagement with the course material. He would then outline the key concepts and potential stumbling blocks for students in the coming week's lecture material, giving one or two examples of how to discuss particular concepts within tutorials. The meetings were deliberately informal to allow for participation by tutors, in particular to share of teaching strategies and experiences between one another. As these discussions were guided by the unit coordinator, they could not be adequately replicated by tutor meetings without the unit coordinator. Additionally, the meetings provided the unit coordinator with insight into individual tutors' extra development needs and, on the basis of input within the meetings, an opportunity to evaluate the suitability of individual tutors for sessional contract renewal.

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Over a three year period of conducting weekly meetings, there was a decrease in the student dropout rate, an improvement in student lecture and tutorial attendance, and an increase in course enrolment numbers. The potential link between the improved student engagement and the unit coordinator's weekly meetings with tutors was investigated through interviews with tutors.

Interviews

A research assistant was employed to interview tutors about their experience and views of the meetings, with a focus on the weekly programme during Semester 1, 2011, when there was a course enrolment of 656 students. Tutors in other undergraduate economics courses were also interviewed for purposes of comparison. University Ethics Committee clearance was granted on the basis that participation in the interviews was voluntary and confidential and that individual views and opinions would be de-identified. The interviews had a common question format, but open ended and extended responses were encouraged. Interviews were recorded and summarised

by the research assistant who had no previous connection to the economics department or the tutors.

Thirty-one tutors were invited by email and follow up telephone call to participate in the interviews, with 18 accepting the invitation. Seven of the eight tutors who had participated in the 2011 meetings were interviewed. Three tutors who had participated in the weekly meetings with the same unit coordinator in previous years were interviewed. The other eight tutors had not attended meetings with the unit coordinator.

Tutors were asked questions across three categories. The first concerned the tutors' cohort characteristics: demographic information (age, gender and citizenship); tutoring and lecturing experience at the university and elsewhere; teaching career intentions; and participation in teaching and learning training at the university. The second category concerned tutors' classroom and teaching experiences: whether they had been adequately prepared as beginner level tutors, and views about challenges within the tutor role. The third category concerned the meetings themselves: tutors who had participated in the weekly meetings were asked to discuss the benefits (if any) of the meetings and how they could be improved; and their attitude towards payment for attendance at the meetings. Some tutors who hadn't participated in the weekly meetings had experiences that were similar (i.e. had attended meetings with unit coordinators in other courses). These tutors also contributed opinions concerning the benefits of meetings between unit coordinators and tutors.

Interview findings

Cohort characteristics

With three exceptions, the interviewed tutors were current or recent postgraduate students in the economics department at the university. In this respect the cohort can be defined as traditional, in the sense that tutoring staff have typically been postgraduate students or industry experts. However, the Australian context is changing to include an increasing proportion of long-term sessionally employed staff who are neither (Gottschalk & McEachern, 2010). The cohort was not traditional in the sense that a large proportion of them were international postgraduate students. There is literature and debate concerning internationalised student cohorts in Australia (Jakubowicz & Monani, 2010; Wright *et al.*, 2012), but what is perhaps less recognised is a concurrent internationalisation of sessional employment within the Australian higher education sector. If this is correct, several of our findings are pertinent to this trend.

There were varying levels of teaching experience within the cohort, ranging from several weeks for two tutors, to tutors with a number of years of tutoring and lecturing experience in Australia, to tutors with full-time lecturing roles and years of teaching experience in other countries prior to commencing postgraduate study in Australia and undertaking sessional tutoring work at the Australian university. Of the tutors with prior teaching experience, about one-third had taught outside Australia, and three-quarters envisaged an academic teaching career which aligns with a recent finding that almost 75 per cent of postgraduate students in Australian universities would like to have an academic career (Edwards *et al.*, 2011).

The variations in teaching experience within the tutor cohort enable comparisons between beginner level tutors and experienced tutors to be made. For the purposes of reporting our findings, we have combined the views of tutors who participated in the 2011 meetings (seven) with tutors who attended the meetings in previous years (three). One-third of the cohort had participated in training and induction programmes on offer within the University, with those attending describing them as beneficial. We note this attendance rate is higher than the national average, which is reported to be approximately 13 per cent of postgraduate students attending tutor training (Edwards *et al.*, 2011). The attendance rate is sufficiently low to suggest that, despite calls for the professional development of sessional staff, many commence to teach and continue with no training or professional development at all. This is relevant to the observations and recommendations we make concerning the benefits of effective management by unit coordinators, as many tutors, and sessional staff more generally, receive little professional support or opportunities for professional development.

Tutors' teaching experiences

Tutors were asked whether they were adequately prepared as beginner level tutors and to comment on challenging aspects of the tutor role. Most tutors seemed reluctant to answer the first question, and so the question was asked once, and then repeated in a qualified way as the question of whether they felt as if they were adequately prepared. The more experienced tutors were asked to look back upon their early teaching experiences at the University and consider, with the benefit of hindsight, how adequately they were prepared as beginner level tutors at the University. Tutors with teaching experience in other countries were not asked about teaching experiences outside Australia.

Most tutors said that they were well prepared as beginner level tutors. When asked to expand on this, tutors said their knowledge of and familiarity with the course content helped them feel prepared. That the tutors knew and felt familiar with the course content is unsurprising, as tutors who are postgraduate students have demonstrated academic proficiency at undergraduate levels of their discipline area. We received a more nuanced view of beginner level tutor preparation from the more experienced tutors, as these tutors reflected on the fact that their confidence and teaching skills had developed over time. They regarded themselves as having been under prepared as beginner level tutors, despite having felt prepared at the time, presumably on the basis of course familiarity and knowledge. This suggests that the more experienced tutors recognise that course content knowledge is only part, albeit a necessary one, of the requirements for effective teaching.

Tutors spoke more freely about their teaching experiences when asked about challenges within the tutoring role. The comment that 'tutoring is extremely stressful when you are new' is indicative of views expressed by a number of them. Tutors discussed challenges in terms of maintaining student interest and focus, managing distracting behaviour (e.g. mobile phone use), wide variation in student ability, varying levels of prior knowledge (mathematics in particular), understanding and responding to students' expectations, lack of familiarity and practice with differing ways to present course content, and large amounts of material to be covered in each tutorial meeting. These seven issues were raised across the tutor cohort, independently of experience level or background.

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For international tutors for whom English is not a first language, the experience of difficulty and associated stress was very high during early stages of tutoring (particularly in the first year), due to a lack of confidence in their English language proficiency, rather than to a lack of teaching experience. Several international tutors said that they had rote learnt answers to set course material and to additional questions they anticipated students would ask. Interestingly, though lacking confidence in their English language proficiency, two tutors said that they were not so concerned about students understanding them, but rather were concerned about their own comprehension and interpretation of students' questions, particularly those of local students who spoke quickly and used unfamiliar English language expressions and idioms.

Impact of weekly meetings

Without exception, the tutors who attended the meetings regarded them as beneficial. Of those who taught in other courses and had not attended meetings, several suggested they would attend meetings if given the opportunity. Many who had attended similar meetings with other unit coordinators said they benefitted from them.

The strongest finding was that tutors believe the meetings produced greater consistency of course delivery than would be the case if there were no meetings. Each tutor who had participated in the weekly meetings said that course consistency was the main benefit. Several experienced tutors also made comparisons between large first year courses with regular unit coordinator meetings and large first year courses without them, saying that consistency is a problem when there are no meetings. These tutors also had experience (sometimes as lecturers as well as tutors) in second and third year courses, enabling them to comment on differences in student needs, expectations and anxieties as students progress from their first year to their later years.

Experienced tutors believed that consistency across tutors, and between unit coordinators and tutors, are key indicators of course quality, particularly for first year courses with large student enrolments. Several of these tutors noted that consistency plays a role in reducing anxiety experienced by a proportion of first year students. When asked for examples, the tutors said that students often feel that their allocated tutor compares unfavourably with other tutors, and/or that their tutorial class does not receive the same amount or same level of tuition as do other tutorial classes; both of which may be causes of tutorial shopping, low tutorial attendance and course dropout rates.

In general, tutors appreciated the meetings as an opportunity to share ideas and provide feedback. Several said they sought and utilised ideas from other tutors regarding the presentation of concepts and problems in class. They appreciated the opportunity to provide feedback to the unit coordinator if students were having problems with a topic, and they liked to see the unit coordinator acting on their feedback, saying this allowed problems to be addressed quickly. This tends not to happen if unit coordinators rely solely on email communication. Several tutors also suggested that email contact from unit coordinators, as the usual means of communication, was far less effective than face to face meetings for providing direction and maintaining communication. One experienced tutor said explicitly that course consistency depends on the leadership of the unit coordinator, moreover that leadership can only be delivered on a direct, or face to face, basis.

The tutors' positive views of the meetings were independent of the level of tutoring experience and independent of local or international background. Tutors who were more experienced, and had also attended the weekly meetings in previous years, expressed a desire to attend meetings if offered in future. Several experienced tutors noted that there is always something new to learn as a teacher. The finding that tutors' motivation to attend meetings does not diminish as they become more experienced is instructive, and we return to it in the discussion.

Tutors believed they should be paid for meeting attendance, and that the payment was adequate, with only one suggesting that the higher repeat tutorial rate should be paid rather than the marking/consultation rate which they received. Several tutors said that although they should be paid for their time, remuneration was not their incentive for attending, as they would attend meetings even if not paid for attendance. The tutors' views about remuneration indicate that they believe payment is a matter of fairness – 'If I give my time I should be paid for it' – but that remuneration had little bearing on their views of the meetings and their motivations for attendance.

Several tutors suggested that fortnightly rather than weekly meetings may be sufficient. However, no tutor suggested that only a few meetings would achieve the same findings as a programme of regular meetings. One tutor suggested that it was difficult to find time to attend the meetings given other commitments.

A particularly high value was placed on the weekly meetings by international postgraduates, for whom English is not a first language, and interestingly, the perception of value did not diminish once anxiety about teaching in English was no longer pressing. Three international postgraduates talked about how much they appreciated the opportunity to teach in Australia, both as an income supplement and as broadening their social horizon. For these tutors, the meetings were highly valued for social as well as professional reasons, and added to the quality of their experience at the Australian university.

The tutors' views of the benefits of the meetings can be summarised as follows:

- Gaining a clear understanding of the unit coordinator's intentions concerning student learning outcomes on a weekly basis.
- Hearing others discuss ways to respond to and manage student expectations, anxiety, and in-class behaviours.
- Finding out about different ways to present course content to cater to differing ability levels and learning styles of students.
- Having the opportunity to provide feedback to the unit coordinator, thus feeling involved in overall course delivery, rather than simply their own tutorial delivery.

In summary, the interviews provided clear evidence that tutors place a high value on unit coordinator meetings as a means to develop as teachers and that they find discussing their work intrinsically rewarding if given the opportunity.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that the relationship between unit coordinators and tutors warrants attention as a relationship between line managers and employees that can be either effective or ineffective, in terms of motivating and engaging, on the one hand, or potentially disempowering and disengaging, on the other. The programme of weekly meetings described in this paper provides an example of management of sessional staff that is effective in these terms.

The most distinctive finding was that experienced tutors valued the weekly meetings at least as much as beginner level tutors, as their motivation to attend meetings did not diminish as their teaching skills and confidence increased over time. Although the meetings probably do contribute to teacher skills development, through sharing teaching tips and experiences, the meetings are better characterised as informal on the job coaching, rather than training.

The distinction between management and training is that with the former a concrete set of work related goals is discussed (in our case on a weekly basis), as opposed to the latter where the focus is knowledge and skills that

are applicable to teaching in general. Management takes place within a particular work context and is focussed on work related outcomes, whereas training is focussed on individual knowledge and skills. The purpose of drawing this distinction is not to devalue training, but rather to say that the meetings, as local management and on the job coaching, have a distinctive value.

We also suggest that management, as described here, is not a form of mentoring. A mentoring relationship between a unit coordinator and sessional tutoring staff is more likely in cases where the unit coordinator is also a tutor's postgraduate supervisor. Mentoring is a commitment with distinctive emotional demands, and spans a considerable period of time. It also serves to foster and support individual career goals, such as developing a research profile. This is far removed from the point and purpose of the meetings, which was students' weekly progress, which is a concrete work related focus.

In large part, sessional tutoring staff are a workforce that receive little in the way of direct management or regular guidance. There are many reasons for this, but one reason may be the assumption that basic goodwill on the part of individual tutors combined with some teaching skills and adequate course-specific knowledge will translate into student learning outcomes. Our findings provide no evidence against this assumption, but we regard as instructive the finding that experienced tutoring staff viewed the meetings as contributing to better course outcomes – course consistency in particular. This suggests that irrespective of the benefits of training, training is not a substitute for regular and effective local management.

The results of our interviews align with several themes reported in the UK's *Macleod Report*. In general terms, the *Macleod Report* is an extension of organisational psychology research, which shows that 'job engagement is associated with a sustainable workload, feelings of choice and control, appropriate recognition and reward, a supportive work community, fairness and justice, and meaningful and valued work' (Saks, 2006 p. 603; for an early and highly influential paper, see Kahn, 1990).

The *Macleod Report* discusses large private sector enterprises, small to medium private sector enterprises, public sector and public services organisations, and third sector community and volunteer organisations, but noticeably does not discuss higher education providers and their employees. There is much that can be applied to the higher education sector, understood as a setting in which effective working relationships are a key to delivering on organisational outcomes. In our example, the outcomes are about student learning. The following remarks from the *Macleod Report* are pertinent:

> Employees get most information from their line manager and well-run briefing group meetings allow for questions, discussion and some dialogue. The good line manager will, in any case, spend time talking informally with their staff, for example in task allocation, problem solving, and work issues especially in coping with change (2009, p. 13).

The *Macleod Report* addresses work contexts where there is an evident distinction between managers and the employees they manage. This distinction is not always clear within the higher education context. Brown *et al.* (2010, p. 170), for example, note that 'continuing academics are in an ambivalent position, positioned as workers in relation to central management but as supervisors in relation to casuals'. Marshall *et al.* (2011, p. 92) highlight that 'Position descriptions and workload formulae are often unclear and … fail to recognise or include the work of leadership and management. Furthermore, criteria used to evaluate performance of those with leadership or management responsibilities are often ambiguous.'

There needs to be more explicit recognition of the unit coordinator role as one that includes management of other staff and, accordingly, contributes to the employee engagement of those staff, or not, as the case may be. As noted in the *Macleod Report*, employees within organisations that have high levels of employee engagement are coached no less than once a week by their immediate or local manager. On the basis of their research, they propose that regular coaching goes a long way to ensuring three work related outcomes: first, that outcomes are clearly established and well understood; second, that work done well is regularly acknowledged; and third, that problems are quickly identified and promptly addressed (Macleod & Clarke, 2009, 2010). These features of effective local management should be harnessed within the higher education sector.

Conclusion

Our suggestion that regular face to face meetings between unit coordinators and tutors should be promoted as a species of effective local management may seem at odds with the ethos of the higher education sector. Management speak is seen by many as antithetical to the ethos of academic life, as academic careers are often chosen for semi-vocational reasons and the notion of working relationships as collegial relationships is valued. In addition, management tasks are often seen as

necessary, but not at all welcome. Accordingly, our suggestion may seem to some to be a managerial-style imposition; however, by local or line management we mean no more than regular face to face meeting and coaching that fosters an employee's sense of engagement with the purpose and goals of their work.

This lack of clarity, or possible ambivalence about management, should be addressed to the extent that unit coordinators are explicitly recognised as both employees and supervisors or line managers, as are many people in other employment sectors. Better clarity and focus upon the line management aspect of the unit coordination role is needed, and unit coordinators should be expected to be effective line managers of sessional tutoring staff. This needs to be adequately recognised within workload allocations and, possibly, in ad hoc management training for course coordinators. It should also be valued as a direct means of engaging sessional staff in their work as tutors and classroom teachers.

There is little reason why the higher education sector should not pay heed to the well-established view within organisational psychology literature that for employees, 'job engagement is associated with a sustainable workload, feelings of choice and control, appropriate recognition and reward, a supportive work community, fairness and justice, and meaningful and valued work' (Saks, 2006, p. 603; see also Kahn, 1990). This applies to unit coordinators as well as the sessional staff who are employed to work with them as tutors.

Like employees in other sectors, the sessional staff we interviewed appeared to respond well to their manager, the unit coordinator, taking a regular and genuine interest in their work. In turn, to the extent that unit coordinators are engaged in the effective line management of the sessional staff who tutor in their courses, this should be recognised and valued by their line managers and beyond.

The fact that the course concerned was a first year course with a large enrolment may indicate that generalisation across other discipline areas is possible, as students in many large first year courses across a variety of discipline areas in many Australian universities receive much of their classroom teaching from tutors employed on a sessional basis.

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