

## A Panoramic View of Some Challenges Inhibiting Access to Higher Education in Developing Countries

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### Abstract

In spite of all the dialectics as to whether education is a social or investment good, there is no doubt that it is a universal good which man should strive to receive as a life long venture. Adequate investments in education facilitate the achievement of most other development goals and increase the probability that progress will be sustained. However, the various challenges being faced by higher education in most countries of the world especially in the area of effective, efficient productive function, widening of access and participation, have dwarfed the various visions and missions of these institutions. The funding dilemma; “massification” of higher education; curriculum and pedagogical deficiencies; quality assurance bottlenecks; out-dated technologies for learning teaching and research; lack of academic freedom and autonomy; weak knowledge creation; limited access and regional disparities; corruption and inefficiency; political interference among other problems, have ambushed higher education and held it hostage in most countries of the world especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. This paper observes that the aforementioned problems have negatively impacted on access and meaningful participation of citizens in higher education. In a globalized-knowledge based economy therefore, templates for action plans geared towards strategizing higher education for optimal performance should be instituted. These action plans include-making enough funds available to fast-track developments in the system, including the provision of physical facilities and cutting-edge technologies for learning, teaching and research; removal of all impediments affecting the widening of access and participation in higher education and a deliberate effort put in place to ensure quality assurance, curriculum and pedagogical harmonization, relevance of programmes to national economics and sustainability.

**Keywords:** Panoramic View, Challenges Inhibiting Access, Higher Education, Developing Countries.

### Introduction

In spite of all the dialectics as to whether education should be targeted towards those who are willing and are deemed to have the ability to avail themselves of such opportunities (Social demand Approach) or whether in structuring education. it should be to quantify the required manpower in terms of quantity, type and amount (Manpower Requirement Approach) in relation to the economy or that education is an investment good which is profitable to the receiver (Cost Benefit Analysis Approach), there is no doubt that education is a universal good which man should strive to receive as a life long venture. This is why Nwadiani (2012: 17) opined that “the tendency to relate educational provisions to national development arose from the popularization of education as an *unexplained residual* in national cum economic development equations”. Beside, education is also a formator of human capital.

Education is central to development and a key to attaining the Millennium Development Goals. It is one of the most powerful instruments for reducing poverty and inequality and lays a foundation for sustainable economic growth (World Bank, 2009). Research has shown that education is “one of the most effective development investments countries and their donor partners can make” (Basic Education Coalition. 2004). Adequate investments in education facilitate the achievement of most other development goals and increase the probability that progress will be sustained (USAID, 2005). Each year of schooling ‘increases individual output by 4-7 percent, and countries that improve literacy rates by 20-30 percent have seen increases in gross domestic product (GDP) of 5-16 percent’ (Basic Education Coalition (2004). Education builds the human capital that is needed for economic growth. It also produces significant improvements in health, nutrition and life expectancy and countries with an educated citizenry’ are more likely to be democratic and politically stable (USAID, 2005). One major goal that derives from Nigeria’s philosophy of education is the acquisition of appropriate skills and the development of mental, physical and social abilities and competencies as equipment for the individual to live and contribute to the development of the society In line with this goal, UNESCO (1998) asserted that ‘what is needed is educational system that seeks to enhance the full capacity and capabilities of human beings while ministering to the socio-economic needs of Africa (the society)’. As succinctly anchored by Nwadiani (2012:40), the expected role of education in Nigeria and elsewhere is the training and production of ‘skilled, knowledgeable and assured quality manpower for both the world of work, survival and overall national development in the contexts of *individualization, independent humanization, informationalization and lifelong learning*.

In spite of the aforementioned benefits of education and its attendant multiplier gains, providing adequate access to higher education is still problematic. This is a function of multiple challenges education face in an attempt to widen access to the ever-increasing population demanding for higher education. These challenges manifest more

in the areas of funding, human capital resources, pedagogy, quality assurance and relevance, curriculum reforms, attitudinal dispositions, among others.

### **Access Challenges to Higher Education**

A survey by *The Economists* (2005) identified four reasons why higher education faces fundamental change (challenges) These include:

- the democratization, or “massification”, of higher education which means that ever increasing numbers of people in “developed” and “developing” countries are gaining higher education qualifications;
- the use of the knowledge economy for which universities are a vital driver;
- the globalization of higher education turning the sector into an import-export industry: and
- the competition higher education institutions face for students and funding.

These changes (challenges) mean that higher education funding, recruitment: research. collaboration, and teaching must take place in an outward-looking, international setting (Lunn, 2008).

Rasian (2009:2) reported that in most developing countries, higher education exhibits severe deficiencies with system expansion, an aggravating factor. He reasoned that demand for increased access is likely to remain strong: with public and private sectors seeking to meet it with an array of new higher education institutions. Besides, rapid and chaotic expansion is usually the result, with the public sector generally under-funded and the private (for profit) sector focused on short-term, market-driven needs, in addition, an absence of institutional quality measure make students’ choices uniformed. This obviously will make it difficult to enlist consumer demand in the battle to raise standards. The other challenge as articulated by the World Bank, (2000:36) is that “developing countries are left with a formidable task of expanding their higher education systems and improving quality, all within continuing budgetary constraints”. The various access challenges to higher education are further catalogued below.

### **Funding/Budgetary Constraints**

Talking about budgetary constraints, it is quite obvious that higher education in many Sub-Saharan Africa and developing countries, are facing funding crisis as observed earlier. This position is collaborated by Saint, Hartnett and Strassner (2003) when they noted that Nigeria’s allocation shares for education diverge sharply from regional and international norms. This divergence, they reasoned, begs justification. For example, UNESCO’s World Education Report (2001) indicated that for 19 other countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, education expenditure averaged 5.1 % of GDP and 19.6% of total government expenditures. On average, their Report continued, these countries allocated 21.1% of their education budgets to tertiary education. In comparison with other African nations, Nigeria’s funding efforts on behalf of education is less than half as vigorous and its budgeting priority for the education sector is lower, but tertiary education receives a much higher share of these comparatively smaller amounts of national resources, the *Report* intoned.

While it may not be possible to quickly identify some of the major reasons that prompt governments in Anglophone Africa into enacting policies and actions aimed at widening access to higher education, it may not be out of place to suggest that the demand for higher education (especially university education) by their citizens has grown over the years (Oduaran. 2005:2). Despite the efforts that have been made to widen access to higher education, there are several countries where the demand for university education is far exceeding the supply of same. One way out of this dilemma in the case of Nigeria is to introduce some fees in the universities and other higher institutions (Government is reluctant to do this fully because of its reverberating effects on the system) even when the sponsors of learners do not have visible income that can keep their wards in school, he reasoned.

As Weidman (1993:24) noted, “government budgets in Africa have been inadequate to fund the actual needs of institutions of higher learning”. This is the situation that universities are grappling with at the moment. On the one hand, the higher institutions (especially the universities) are being requested to widen access and on another, they are being told to do so even with shrinking budgets. Experts believe that the universities specifically have been cornered into buying into the commodification of university education and university administrators are standing by in a hapless manner. The resultant effect of this is that the universities are being asked to diversify their base through cost-recovery measures and charge fees for students/services to non-university constituencies and re-invigorate the pursuit of contracts and consultancies, even if strict academic function diminish in frequency and quality. This is where the dilemma of developing countries higher institutions are left with no choice but to go to parliamentarians and other “philanthropist” and ‘do gooders’ with caps in hands begging for scarce resources thereby compromising the academic freedom and autonomy of these institutions (The ASSU strike in Nigeria since the 10 of July, 2013 till December, 2013 is a case in point).

Inadequate provision of human and material resources as well as infrastructural facilities due to poor funding resulted in the formulation of the principles of faculty carrying capacity which stipulates that admission of students should be a function of available facilities such as classrooms, staff, equipment, materials/consumables. This no doubt affects both access and equity in higher education. Admission into universities is not only excruciating but very competitive as a result of limited spaces.

Insufficiency of resources to fund a basically cost-intensive educational system no doubt is a major problem confronting university education in Nigeria today. A study by Enyi (2002: 16-25) revealed that despite efforts by universities to diversify their sources of income, the effectiveness of such sources has not been proven due to a number of problems amongst which are the fact that universities are more of social than entrepreneurial establishments and declining endowment and other external sources of finance. The declining endowment levels when compared with the under listed ten (10) universities (as at 2008) which were among the top 15 universities in the world (have their endowment funds standing at over several billion dollars each), is very shocking to say the least (Table 1).

**Table 1: Endowment Funds of 10 Universities as at 2008 among the top 15 World's Universities**

S/N	Name of University	World Ranking	Continent	Endowment
1.	Harvard University	1	USA	US \$35.6 million (₦4, 272,000,000,000) T
2.	University of Cambridge	2	U.K	(₦943,000,000,000)B
3.	Stanford University	3	U.S.A	US \$17.2billion(₦2,064,000,000,000)T
4.	Columbia University	7	U.S.A	US 7.15 billion (₦858,000,000,000)B
5.	Princeton University	8	USA	US \$15.8billion (₦1, 896,000,000)T
6.	University of Chicago	9	U.S.A	US \$6.5 billion (₦780, 000,000,000)B
7.	Oxford University	10	UK	(₦828,000,000,000)B
8.	Yale University	11	U.S.A	US \$25.5 billion (₦2,7000,000,000)T
9.	Cornell University	12	U.S.A	US \$5.5 billion (₦660,000,000)T
10.	University of Pennsylvania	15	U.S.A	US \$6.78 billion (₦780, 000,000,000) B

**Source:** Adapted from Peretomode, V.F. (2008, p 14)

In an effort to reposition higher education in Nigeria, a national summit on higher education was held between 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> March, 2002 and an action plan was drawn up for 2002-2007 on the resolution of the National Summit on Higher Education. The funding of higher education formed the agenda of sub-theme 3 of the plan which part of the recommendations bothering on the deregulation of university education (FME, 2002:31-43). Deregulating education is seen as a means of arresting the decay in the system. Has this changed the financial landscape and anaemia in the system? The dependent rate of Nigerian universities on government(s) is reported to be as higher as 97.1%.

### Quality Variable

In addition to the challenges of funding, human resources in the right proportion, deteriorating physical facilities and equalization of opportunity and access to higher education, is the problem of *quality*. The argument has been that it is not the *quantity* or widening of access to university education that all matters but also the quality of the curriculum, pedagogy, products of the system, and above all, relevance to national development.

Widening access, it is argued is good on its own, but there must be *quality* that should go with *quantity*. Concern has been raised about the decline in the quality of university education offered in Nigeria. This is evident in the quality of some graduates produced by these less- productive universities, The deregulation of this sector making it possible for so many private universities to be licensed (as a way of widening access) is seen to be producing some ripple effects, not only in Nigeria but other developing countries of the world. Obayan (1999) noted that the quality of education offered by higher education institutions at the recent time has deteriorated substantially resulting in poor quality products especially in engineering and the sciences (Are other disciplines left out?). This scenario is attributed to the massification and commercialization of higher education.

The problem of quality in higher education is not limited only to Nigeria but also that of some developing countries. Amadi (2004) citing *The Chronicle for higher Education* (1987) survey revealed that academic quality is often a causality of worldwide enrolment boom. Accumulating evidence indicate that greatly increased access to higher education over the past two decades, has come at a tremendous price; a severe and pervasive decline in academic quality. The enrolment explosion is prevailing over standards to such an extent that stakeholders are asking whether the end result has much value. Most governments seemed both unwilling to limit enrolments but at the same time unable to increase appropriations sufficiency to solve the system's basic problems.

The highlight went on to cite samples of findings in many individual countries on the problems associated with widening access and its implications for quality In Argentina instance, no one in government seemed willing to revert to more restrictive admissions. Many universities in Britain are now having great difficulty in maintaining their financial integrity let alone achieving much by way of purposive development in widening access and furthering research. Canadian higher education is retrenching and Canadian students are graduating with an average personal debt of more than 20,000 dollars. Universities in Columbia are in danger of being "strangled, asphyxiated". In Eastern Europe, a partial solution has been to allow selected graduates to study abroad, with the calculated risk that some may never return (off-shore higher education).

Prospects for higher education in the year ahead do not seem good in Ecuador. Enrolments have gone to the rooftops thereby resulting to overcrowding and financial strains and subsequent deterioration in the academic quality of almost all the universities.

In France, and because of financial considerations, every year budget had kept pace with inflation with some universities apparently reducing rather than expanding their enrolments. Israel's Higher Education is in such dire financial straits that some top universities officials have warned that their institutions might not be able to open due to excessive expansion, and that mismanagement have also contributed to the problem. The problem and story is the same in Japan, Mexico, Peru, Soviet Union (where institutions are producing doctors who cannot diagnose diseases and engineers who know nothing about computing) regardless of the level of industrialization or ideological posturing.

Lamenting on the quality of higher education in Iran, Rasian (2009:3) complained that higher education in Iran today suffers from an overall lack of quality. Much of this can be traced back to ineffective management, increased enrolments, a shortage of technology, antiquated instructional methods largely based on memorization and misaligned incentives for teachers and students. These problems are exacerbated by difficulties in recruitment of qualified teachers in critical fields; diminishing and skewed public funding leading to system inefficiencies and limited access and regional disparities.

Schwartzman (2001) asserts that in spite of large differences in social structures, economic conditions, cultural and historical backgrounds, higher education systems in most countries face similar challenges, some of which conflict. As a result of this, they need:

- more research capacity to enhance their countries presence in a world where science and technology play an ever-growing role;
- to combine elite with mass higher education, in order to provide meaningful and useful information to millions who wish to learn and upgrade their credentials;
- to provide lifelong education to a large public that seeks not only formal degrees, but to keep up and readapt to a rapidly evolving labour markets; and
- to maintain and grow their universities as centres for culture and scholarship, providing their societies with a space for the development and maintenance of critical knowledge, independent thinking, social identity building and values.

With a measured conclusion, he asserted that higher education institutions face two main limitations, viz - (a) the fact that the same factors inducing higher education reform, are also the same factors that limit the availability of resources for higher education institutions. The financial adjustments required by a highly competitive and unpredictable global economy and the growing demand for social services by impoverished population, increase the cost of basic education and public health, and limit what is left over for higher education expansion and reform: (b) institutional arrangements and traditions almost everywhere organized higher education as part of public service, often with strong collegial decision-making mechanisms. But, the rules, regulations and operational practices of civil service and collegial management are not the most suitable for adapting rapidly to change. These are measured and appropriate assessment of higher education dilemma.

Iqbal (2004) commented on the serious deficits in the quality of staff, governance, academic standards, students preparation, research facilities, libraries, and laboratories in a survey of *Pakistan's* higher education system. The higher education system is not at par with international standards. The result is a higher education stem not particularly relevant to societal needs, and a shortage of graduates in the more practical fields, such as sciences, he remarked.

Shrivastava (2006) lists the major challenges in *Indian* higher education system to include the following:

- (a) Over-centralization, which limits institutional autonomy and accountability which is very slow to respond to change;
- (b) Variable quality, with poor, often inflexible responses to market needs;
- (c) Weak knowledge creation due to weak interactions with the economy, society and other academic and research institutions;
- (d) Difficulties in recruitment and retention of qualified teachers in critical fields.
- (e) Diminishing and skewed public funding leading to system inefficiencies;
- (f) Limited access and regional disparities.

As for *Iraq*, Robertson (2009) believes the most fundamental of the many challenges facing Iraq's higher education sector is that of re-establishing its universities as independent institutions, dedicated to education and free of political, religious and ethnic influence. Apart from this challenge, there is also the problem of the absence of government or private research - funding bodies to consistently encourage, nurture and reward excellence in research. The international isolation of the country has also affected the higher education machinery, thereby bringing about declining academic rigour.

The World Bank (2007) reports that education and skill levels in *Turkey* lag international standards, including those of the European Union (EU). In addition, significant disparities also exist in educational quality

and access to gender, social and economic group and geographical location. While educational attainment and skill levels are low in Turkey, private returns to education are high. There are positive returns for secondary as well as tertiary level diplomas

In addition, the positive impact of education on earnings is even greater for females than for males. Indicators of educational quality and access are much lower in Turkey than for current EU countries. However, low education and skills levels present a major concern and bottle neck for Turkey in job creation and competitiveness, the Bank noted.

The condition of Iran's higher education system is not totally too different from that at India, Iraq, Pakistan, and others. Rasian (2009) laments that in today's Iran, universities face rapid growth but in the process of increasing quantity, "we have sacrificed quality" (p.11). Samie (2008) differentiates between "massification" and "vulgarization". The former means "balanced quantitative and qualitative development of a higher education system so that it provides opportunity for all applicants without social, economic, political and cultural discrimination". The latter is, "a political appeal to massive social requests, and insists merely on quantitative expansion". The vulgarized university diminishes its role to that of a vocational institute. 'what researchers in Iran call a 'big school'".

The other related problems that affect quality of higher education in Iran are that. Iranian professors are not paid high salaries (they are often hired for their connections to powerful politicians rather than for talent or knowledge); curricula have two aspects *main credits* (relate to specialized field of knowledge), and *general credits* (designed to improve the values, norms and ideals); laboratory and workshop facilities are improperly utilized, with students not allowed to use scarce lab equipment; high level of unemployment among university graduates because few faculties are familiar enough with industrial and service enterprises to offer courses relevant to the job vacancies that exist (Rahmani and Nazari, 2007, p1).

Commenting on Nigerian higher education system in relation to excellence, quality and standards vis-à-vis compromised standards, Kolo and Indabawa (1992:296), noted that in a variety of programmes put in place to enhance excellence in the Nigerian education system, problems like shoddy application of quotas in admission, poor selection of candidates. Wielding of social and political influences, and lack of sustained resource input, have been noticed. In other words, the contention is that excellence cannot be sacrificed on the alter of equity) demands in an educational system; otherwise, development of the system will be hamstrung. The fundamental question which remains unanswered, however, is whether a balance can be struck between equity and excellence as a basis for sustainable development in the sector.

### **Quota-Based Admission Variable**

The issue of quota-based admission has attracted some criticism. Saint et al., (2003) reported that until the advent of the current government's university autonomy policies, admission to federal universities in Nigeria was regulated by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board. The Board reserved 30% of university's admissions for residents of its immediate geographical or "catchments" areas and a further 20% for educationally disadvantaged students. Some 10% of university admissions were made at the Vice-Chancellor's discretion (rescinded?). Only 40% of students were admitted on the basis of the merits of their academic performance.

A study carried out by Adeyemi (2001 ) found significant differences in academic performance between students admitted on merit and those admitted on other criteria. It was also discovered that the drop-out and repetition rate for the later group was three times higher than for the merit-based group. Although, Nigeria's quota-based admissions policy may have made university access somewhat more equitable, it did not necessarily broaden the possibilities for academic success among those admitted (Saint et al, 2003). Though access has increased, university responsiveness to the varied needs and abilities of a more diverse student body produced by rising enrolments, has been limited. This is a big and serious poser for our universities on the issue of quality assurance.

### **Curricula and Pedagogy Variables**

On the issue of *curricula and pedagogy*, stakeholders are of the view that it has impacted less on the students and as such, students' success rate seems limited. Drop-out rates appear to be high. This apart, it is argued that developing countries higher educational system is labour market blind especially in this era of globalized knowledge-based economy. This has resulted in unemployment and under-employment of graduates because they lack the required critical skills, knowledge and innovative abilities that will make the difference.

From the standpoint of pedagogy, it was argued that expanded access and higher participation rates mean that student populations will become increasingly diverse in terms of their academic preparation, means, capacities, motivation and interests. The near notorious absence of data on these critical elements makes responsiveness on the part of the university system difficult. Nonetheless, the National Universities Commission (NUC) in 2002 attempted to calculate the dropout rates within the federal university system. Its preliminary findings suggested that dropout rates may be as high as 50% at six universities. Dropout rates of 10% or less were attributed only to the three federal universities at Kano. Maiduguri and Owerri (NUC, 2002). It was suggested that additional

research attention should be given to this issue of institutional performance and system efficiency would seem warranted.

It was also observed that both public and private employers of university graduates as well as the government itself are consciously aware that the qualities of university graduates are not adequate. A study of the labour Market by Dabalén, Oni and Adekola (2002), found out that “university graduates are poorly trained and unproductive on the job and shortcomings are particularly severe in oral and written communications and in applied technical skills”. This problem is aggravated by the high dosage of Pidgin English as a sub-culture in Nigerian university campuses, which is more or less the communication code. The relegation of the mother tongue and the lingua franca to the background is a minus for academic performance. It is suggested therefore that Pidgin English be formalized in Nigeria to serve as our lingua franca in the absence of a strong binding, indigenous language.

### **Attitude Factor**

Outside the aforementioned challenges facing the equalization of opportunity and access to university education (even at all levels), there are several other factors that have hampered the provision of equal educational opportunity in Nigeria. Fagbemi (1999), observed that one of the social/cultural constraints is the attitude of people. For instance, he noted, the Muslim North has defied all Islamic injunctions that urge Muslims to seek for all forms of knowledge as long as it is of benefit to mankind and have maintained a hostile stance against Western education. In spite of the fact that western education in Nigeria has Christian religious roots, its usefulness in the modern world should be acknowledged and accepted by all. For as Akinpelu (1981:216) opined, “the educational imbalance in the country may not in fact be corrected, unless efforts are made to equalize the awareness and the enthusiasm of the different parts of the country for education”.

Still on attitude, stakeholders are of the opinion that both federal and state governments do not accord education the priority it deserves. The mind-set that education will always “manage” irrespective of its bastardization should change. University education is a big industry that deserves a priority ranking in the scheme of things. Akumah (2005) points out that any government that places educational expenditures second or third in her budget list regards education as ill-investment and will reap the dividends in all directions, he warned.

### **Corruption Factor**

Other constraints to higher education, it is observed is the level of corruption in the developing countries especially Nigeria. The ever-increasing level of poverty in the country that manifests itself on the social-economic background of individuals, and so on. The aim of allowing private individuals, organizations and voluntary agencies to establish universities was to promote access to and equity in university education. Unfortunately, schools which are supposed to be service organizations have been turned into profit-making ventures by their proprietors (commercialization of education). The students are made to pay very exorbitant fees and as a result only parents of high socio-economic background can afford to send their children to private universities. Thus, private universities marginalize children and adults living in poverty, thereby reducing the quality of public education.

Fagbemi (1999) also fingered the constraint of poor planning. Education, he noted, must be planned and planning requires reliable data. Planning data is a problem in Nigeria. There is not even a reliable census and consequently, proper planning cannot take place.

The other constraint is the under-current of politics whereby unofficial but organized and powerful groups, hamper efforts to equalize education in Nigeria. This is manifested in such expressions as. “the mafia”, ‘hidden agenda”. “playing politics”, and so on. As earlier observed in spite of large differences in social structures, economic conditions, cultural and historical backgrounds, higher education systems in most countries face similar challenges, some of which conflict.

### **The Way Forward**

For higher education across the globe including Nigeria to play its role of redefining the needs of the individual, society and the national and international economy, the following must urgently be done viz:

- (a) Enough funds should be made available to provide physical and instructional facilities’ for research purposes;
- (b) Out-dated technologies should be replaced with state-of-the-art ones to facilitate innovative teaching and learning that is compliant with the needs of the society;
- (c) There should be a proactive synergy between the gown (higher institution) and the town (society) in terms of all round development and economic sustainability
- (d) Technology incubation centres and research centres should establish bilateral relationships with their international counterparts to fast-track science and technological growth and innovations;
- (e) Higher institutions should liaise with the organized private sector to enhance the development of research

- and technological breakthrough aimed at protecting patent rights;
- (f) High institutions staff of different categories should be encouraged to go for in-service training to equip them with the best innovative global practices.
  - (g) The *push* and *pull* factors that instigates brain-drain should as a matter of necessity be addressed.
  - (h) While widening of access is not a totally a bad idea, it should be accompanied with quality assurance in the context of physical facilities, libraries, equipment, human resources, curricula and pedagogy. Higher education supervisory agencies and institutions should establish quality assurance centres to monitor the enthronement of quality culture in all aspects of higher education institution's life.

### Conclusion

The multiple problems facing higher education and by implication, access to university education cuts across not only Sub-Saharan African countries but also that of other developing countries of South-East Asia, Latin America and even Europe. The problem of low funding, faculty under-staffing, dilapidated physical infrastructure, regional variabilities in access, curricula deficiency, issue of relevance, pedagogical methods, are problems harassing or holding hostage higher education in various countries of the world, including Nigeria. It is therefore concluded that to enhance equitable access to higher education in developing countries, the issue of quality, relevance, applicability in the modern globalized knowledge-based economy, should be pursued rigorously.

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