Cultural Dimension in Internationalization of the Curriculum in Higher Education

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Abstract: Internationalization in higher education seems to be an unavoidable process, albeit temporarily limited by the COVID-19 (coronavirus disease of 2019) pandemic. Specifically, internationalization of the curriculum in the context of higher education is a dimension of this internationalization that is less valued in published studies. This paper, through critical reflection, sought to contribute to a deeper understanding of internationalization of the curriculum in higher education. The methodology used consisted of a bibliographic search in international databases, and the selected documents were analyzed using the content analysis technique. This analysis allowed concluding that internationalization of the curriculum in higher education is a complex process and involves several actors, with various challenges to be considered. For this process to be successful, it involves the ability to be attentive to the cultural multiplicity that will be experienced in classes where this internationalization of the curriculum exists.

1. Introduction

The global higher education system may be described as an "open social system with non-rigid interelement links, consistency of the elements themselves and flexibility of normative control" [1] (p. 251).

The internationalization of higher education is currently considered as one of its aims at a global level, shaping the very transformation of these institutions [2] at the macro (policy design and decision-making), meso (curricular structures and policies), and micro (teaching–learning process) levels [3]. This process of internationalization has a profound influence on the global ranking of higher education institutions (HEIs), as well as on increasing funding possibilities [4,5]. This poses profound new challenges [2,4,6–13] and is shaped by a dynamic multiplicity of academic, but also political, economic, and sociocultural, factors, both within and outside each HEI [5,14]. For example, Duong and Chua [2] (p. 670) stated that "Maringe (2009) categorized five broad groups of internationalization strategies; namely, curriculum, student recruitment, staff recruitment, staff professionalization and funding".

This article, which seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of internationalization of the curriculum in higher education, is structured as follows: next section puts forth the methodology used to collect, select, and analyze the information which the study was based on. Next, the topic of internationalization of higher education is addressed in a broad way. Section 3 analyses the

internationalization of the curriculum as a central element of the internationalization of higher education. The article ends with the main conclusions of the study.

2. Materials and Methods

This article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of internationalization of the curriculum in higher education. The methodology used in this article is qualitative in nature, inasmuch that it allows obtaining a thorough and detailed level of understanding of the phenomena studied. The authors carried out a search in the Scilit database between 12 and 18 November 2020, searching the terms "internationalization" plus "higher education" plus "curriculum" in all main fields (articles, books, and book chapters) and obtained 312 results. These documents were read and selected according to their heuristic capacity for the purposes of this paper, and the final number of documents that resulted from this selection and the basis of the analysis offered in this article was 46. This analysis was carried out through a critical literature review using the technique of content analysis.

3. Internationalization

Zayed [15] (p. 14), mobilizing Leutwyler et al. [16], states that internationalization of higher education:

[. . .] refers to a process focusing on the programming of higher education activities in the areas of teaching, research, and service. That is through the recruitment of international students, cooperation or partnerships with foreign universities, and the establishment of branch campuses in countries around the world.

These dynamic processes of internationalization of higher education can be subdivided, according to De Wit [5] (p. 538), into two dimensions: (i) internationalization abroad and (ii) internationalization at home. The author specifies these dimensions, proposing that "The 'abroad' component: mobility of students, faculty and programs, has been more predominant than the 'at home' component: internationalization of the curriculum and learning outcomes, perceived as a neoliberal and western paradigm".

In general, internationalization corresponds to an institutional process aimed at expanding the range of international activities, both within the HEIs and between them and other educational institutions. The increase in the number of international students and teaching and non-teaching staff is also part of this process. The literature on 'internationalization' focuses mainly on incoming and outgoing international students, as well as on the teaching and learning challenges that the increasing diversity of the student population pose to HEIs. Forward-looking institutions seek, in their internationalization strategy, to make the curriculum (formal and informal) more relevant and engaging for international students. On the other hand, HEIs are concerned with promoting 'internationalization at home', with the central aim of preparing all students for life and work in a global economy [17].

Thus, internationalization seeks to address a set of challenges that higher education systems face in their efforts to develop at the global level. Table 1 depicts some of the main challenges.

Table 1. The international partnership as instrument of development of the global higher education system.

Following the correspondence of the content and the level of the higher education to the needs of economics, politics as well as social and cultural sphere of the society
Alignment of the professional training levels in different countries and regions
Enforcement of the international solidarity and partnership in the sphere of the higher education
Joint use of knowledge and skills in different countries
Assistance in development of higher education bodies, especially in the developing countries including financing from international foundations
Coordination of activities of educational bodies in order to develop the higher education
Encouraging of overall improvement of flexibility, coverage and quality of the higher education that promotes elimination of reasons for "brain-drain"
Motivation for competence among schools of thought and educational systems combined with academic solidarity and mutual assistance

Source: Kashkan and Egorova [1] (p. 252).

The analysis of Table 1 leads to the conclusion that there are, indeed, many challenges to the internationalization of HEIs. However, if the process is successful, there are also—and consequently—benefits for HEIs [18]. In this regard, Kabeera [6] (p. 86), in an analysis of the specific Chinese context, concludes that there is a diversity of benefits in internationalization:

> [. . .] *which include quality human resources, skills development and exposure, professional mobility and research development, it also highlighted potential challenges which included academic colonization, low quality education standards and brain drain hence the paper recommends that, there should a proper system for evaluating students who go to study abroad and proper structure of tuition payment.*

One of the challenges of internationalization of higher education is, according to Zelenková and Hanesová [18], the teaching and communication methods mobilized by teachers in the international learning–teaching process. As the authors point out, with the internationalization of HEIs and the increasing incoming of international students, "[. . .] there is a growing need for the university teachers to be able to communicate with them in order to ensure effectiveness in educational processes" [18] (pp. 1–2).

Internationalization is often associated with the mobility of students, teachers, and other HEI staff [4]. Internationalization of the curriculum in higher education is of growing relevance [4,19–21]. This standardization of higher education is intended both to facilitate a higher flux of students and to consolidate the process of HEIs' internationalization. This entails the emergence of a new teaching–learning model, which requires that its actors "keep pace with the fast update of information transforming it into knowledge through experience and critical thinking. As such, the role of formal education nowadays is more related to teaching how to learn rather than teaching what to learn" [22] (p. 19).

Through the bibliographical search that was the basis of this article, it was possible to conclude that, although the literature ascribes a central role to academics in the processes of internationalization of the curriculum, there has been little debate on the issue of training of academic developers, who support these processes [18,20,23]. Table 2 traces the picture of internationalization over the last 30 years and how it has developed, including the main obstacles and failures in its implementation.

Table 2. Some of the main trends in internationalization in the past 30 years.

More focused on internationalization abroad than on internationalization at home
More ad hoc, fragmented, and marginal than strategic, comprehensive, and central in policies
More in the interest of a small, elite subset of students and faculty than focused on global and intercultural outcomes for all
Directed by a constantly shifting range of political, economic, social/cultural, and educational rationales, with increasing focus on economic motivations
Increasingly driven by national, regional, and global rankings
Little alignment between the international dimensions of the three core functions of higher education: education, research, and service to society
Primarily a strategic choice and focus of institutions of higher education, and less a priority of national governments
Less important in emerging and developing economies, and more of a particular strategic concern among developed economies

Source: De Wit [4] (pp. II and III).

Aljuwaiber [24], in his literature review on the transformational role of universities, carried out a PEST (Economic, Social, and Technological) analysis with the aim of understanding the macro-environmental factors that are likely to determine the future of HEIs. Table 3 presents the issues that may impact on HEIs in the future based on the PEST analysis performed, considering political, economic, social, and technological factors.

According to Benitez [25], there are four fundamental mechanisms in the dissemination of internationalization practices that take place both at the system and HEI levels. These mechanisms are (i) classifications, (ii) cooperation, (iii) academic mobility, and (iv) curriculum reforms. The author adds that "[. . .] world-class universities exert a clear influence on all four mechanisms. These institutions set international standards for teaching strategies as well as for research and service practices" [25] (p. 11).

Table 3. Future prospects of higher education institutions (HEIs).

Factor	Description
Political	Political factors cover various forms of government interventions and political activities in an economy. Specifically, political factors include policy in areas such as tax, labor, education, and environment, and changes to, the development of, and also include political stability (2014). There are several factors that the current study has found that universities should take into consideration, for instance, (1) the impact of low carbon emissions, (2) presidential elections, (3) reduced support for universities, and (4) more direction/influence from the government.
Economic	Economic factors include the macroeconomic conditions of the external environment, as well as unemployment rates, economic growth, and the inflation rate (2014). These factors have prime impacts on how a university operates and makes decisions. The key factors in this element that can influence universities are (1) increased global commercialization, (2) less funding for universities, and (3) public private partnerships.
Social	Social factors cover cultural and demographic factors in the external environment, such as health awareness, the population growth rate, career attitudes, and trends in consumerism (2014). This research found several influential factors affected by social element, including (1) distance learning or e learning, (2) increasing demand for a green society, (3) the impact of university ranking, and (4) increased value to community.
Technological	Technological factors comprise things such as research and development activity, automation, technological sophistication, and the degree of technological change (2014). Universities can be influenced by such factors as (1) the implementation of advanced technology such as virtual lectures, (2) the use of Nanotechnology, and (3) future innovation.

Source: Aljuwaiber [24] (p. 18).

As mentioned above, internationalization of the curriculum takes on a central role in the internationalization of higher education systems and HEIs. This aspect will be addressed in the next section.

4. The Internationalization of the Curriculum

For Johns-Boast [26] (p. 4), the curriculum can be described according to various concepts. The author uses the following ones:

- a concept—how one thinks about a curriculum in the abstract or meta level;
- an artifact—a set of documents (for implementation), e.g., the written, published, official, intended curriculum;
- a body of knowledge—content (that is to be transmitted) and which may include some notion of sequence;
- a process—the life cycle of curriculum or curriculum planning, i.e., an iterative process that includes inception, design, development, delivery (teaching), evaluation, change and retire;
- a product—an attempt to achieve certain objectives through the structure, organization and approach to delivery;
- or a combination of some or all of the above.

The transformation of the curriculum is often referred to in the literature as one of the most relevant strategies in the process of internationalization of higher education, and teachers are key players in the success of this process [27].

Schuerholz-Lehr et al. [28] (p. 70) define the internationalization of the curriculum as "a process by which international elements are infused into course content, international resources are used in course readings and assignments, and instructional methodologies appropriate to a culturally diverse student population are implemented". As with the definitions offered by other authors, this definition ascribes great relevance to academics and places them at the core of the curriculum transformation process, that is, an internationalized curriculum is, naturally, highly influenced by teachers' perspectives and values [27]. Thus, internationalization of the curriculum is also an exercise in transforming teachers' perspectives and increasing their competence as teachers and researchers.

According to Niehaus and Williams [27] (p. 73), "Curriculum transformation can clearly not be successful in a vacuum; rather it should be part of a broader internationalization strategy that provides

a foundation for expanding individual faculty members' internationalization work". In their study, which was based on the theory of transformative learning, the authors grouped their finding into two categories, depicted in Table 4.

Table 4. HEIs' future prospects.

Domain	Instrumental Outcomes	Transformative Outcomes
Teaching	• New international and comparative topics • Broadened existing content to include international and comparative perspectives	• Reflective pedagogical practices • Authenticity of sources • Integration of international themes in courses
Research	• Conference presentations • Research with students • Publications	• Views on research in one's field • Perspective on one's own research
Personal and professional benefits	• Expanded professional networks • Enhanced reputation	• Perspective on culture and difference • Understanding of internationalization

Source: Niehaus and Williams [27] (p. 67).

In the context of the internationalization of education, particularly higher education, Williams and Lee [13] (p. 10) warn of the importance of HEIs having in place strategies and mechanisms for the "integration of international students in the lives and cultures of our institutions and their mutual relationships with domestic students". The authors add that "Intercultural communication skills are needed by both domestic and international students to bridge the cultural gaps" [13] (p. 10). Accordingly, Williams and Lee [13] propose frames of reference for international education, portrayed in Table 5.

Table 5. Seven frames of reference of international education.

1. Ideas, philosophy, peaceful relations, and cultural diplomacy
2. Body of knowledge and corresponding intellectual competencies
3. Form of inquiry
4. Giant laboratory of international and intercultural relations
5. Program of educational reform of higher education
6. Business, economics, and employment
7. Leadership as integrative force

Source: Adapted from Williams and Lee [13] (p. 7).

Valdés Montecinos [3] argues that internationalization of the curriculum is closely linked to the integration of the international and multicultural dimension in the curricula of study programs, with the main purpose of training citizens and providing them with technical competences (for the performance of the profession) and transversal competences (social action), both in national contexts and—and very pertinently—in international and multicultural environments. For the development and deepening of the topic of internationalization of the curriculum, interaction and intercultural aspects are involved, see Duong and Chua [2], Zelenková and Hanesová [18], and Ji [23], among others. For its part, and in line with Valdés Montecinos [3], Ji [23], based on the definition of internationalization of the curriculum proposed by Leask [29], also advocates the incorporation of an international and intercultural dimension in the curriculum, teaching methods and evaluation itself.

In the internationalization of the curriculum, the intercultural competence, whether of university teachers or students, takes on a pivotal role [18,23,30,31]. The proficiency in the English language, by teachers and students, is paramount, as English is the current lingua franca in international communication [18,22], as well as in the dissemination of research and teaching [15].

The centrality of interculturality in the internationalization of the curriculum [32] becomes clear from the above. Zelenková and Hanesová [18] (p. 2) state, in this regard, that

This communication will turn out to be beneficial only if it is both linguistically and culturally appropriate—open to otherness, flexible in changing routines, eager to investigate and appreciate different cultural values, practices, or norms, evaluating them without prejudices and stereotypes [. . .] The interculturality should penetrate into all three dimension of his/her personality and relationships: cognitive (awareness of cultures and self-awareness), affective (tolerance, empathy, appreciation of diversity) and behavioral (acting towards 'others', interaction and cooperation skills).

Another highly relevant aspect in internationalization of the curriculum is the methodologies used in the teaching–learning process. The learner-centered approach, with the teacher being a facilitator and acting as one of several resources, is highlighted. In this process, both teachers and students should have appropriate multilingual, social attitudes, and intercultural competences [7,18,33]. The importance of aspects such as student-centeredness, self-reflexivity, and collaborative learning of students and teachers (co-production of knowledge) is underlined [34,35]. These aspects are complemented with digital literacy [22,36,37] and digitalization [38].

The internationalization of the curriculum has, as widely explained, numerous advantages, but Castilho [39] (p. 121) warns of some difficulties in this internationalization between developed and developing countries. The author maintains that the internationalization of the curriculum between these two groups of countries "[. . .] has been seen as a unilateral transference, rather than as solidary cooperation, and it points to the need for an international curricular project and critical and dialogic propositions, within a context in which diversity is delineated as a universal project". According to the author, the internationalization of the curriculum can help to mitigate inequalities between developed and developing countries, provided that they follow a logic of design and adoption of common curricular policies [39].

For the process of internationalization of the curriculum to be successful, it needs to be monitored, assessed, and accredited by international assessment and accreditation agencies. This implies the establishment of a common standard for HEIs and their curricula regarding the quality of the teaching–learning processes. The establishment of this standard makes it necessary to implement international standards regarding quality assurance in higher education, with the purpose of facilitating the process of recognition of study programs at the local, national, and international levels [3].

According to Ji [23], intercultural competence is one of the key competences of higher education graduates and one of the most important for global citizenship. This intercultural competence is comprehensive and involves cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of the individual. In this process of preparing students for the acquisition and development of intercultural competence as a result of internationalization of the curriculum, teachers play a major role. The tasks of these institutional actors are described in Table 6.

Table 6. Tasks of the academic staff in curriculum internationalization.

State the intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes the students will exhibit in the curriculum
Clarify the ways how students will achieve those intercultural goals through the curriculum
Arrange teaching environment in which students will obtain multiple opportunities to practice the intended intercultural strategies
Make the assessment criteria referring to the development of intercultural competence explicit

Source: Adapted from Ji [23] (p. 15).

As in any teaching–learning process, one of the central dimensions in the process of internationalization of the curriculum is the assessment of students, their performance, and development. Ji [23] (p. 17) argues that a "[. . .] single method or perspective often remains insufficient. Thus, assessment of intercultural competence should adopt a multimethod, multi-perspective approach that is focused more on the process of intercultural competence development than on an end-result". Building on Leask [29], Ji [23] offers some of the key features of the assessment in the context of an internationalized curriculum, listed in Table 7.

Table 7. Key features of assessment in an internationalized curriculum.

Be aligned with program and course intended learning outcomes
Reflect progressive development of intercultural and international skills and knowledge through the program of study
Include assessment tasks and rubrics that make clear to students what levels of achievement are expected of them in relation to each intended learning outcome
Focus on students' demonstrating their abilities to communicate, negotiate and problem solve effectively in a range of intercultural situations relevant to the discipline, the program, and related professional practice
Test students' ability to gather and apply knowledge in and across disciplines in a globalized world
Encourage students to consider the global application and impact of course content and the impact of culture and language on disciplinary knowledge and professional practice
Include reflective written tasks that require students to analyze critically and reflect on their own assumptions, values, and beliefs

Source: Adapted from Ji [23] (p. 17).

Taking into account the requirements listed in Table 7, the assessment of students concerning their intercultural competence should consider (i) the development of the student and (ii) the development by the student of intercultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills, in particular, regarding their communication, negotiation, and problem-solving competences in intercultural situations. Other competences that should also be assessed are those of critical thinking and self-knowledge, always in a human agency logic in a globalized world [23].

In addition to the scientific capacity that teachers have to possess and demonstrate in the teaching–learning process, they should also have the pedagogical capacity to make this process flow and succeed. The two types of competences to be mastered by teachers result in the so-called professional competence. Fakhrutdinova et al. [40] put forth five basic types of professional competence, presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Basic types of professional competence.

Special competence in the field of the taught academic discipline
Methodological competence in the sphere of the students' knowledge and skills formation ways
Socio-psychological competence in the field of pedagogical communication
Differential-psychological competence in the field of students' abilities to assimilate knowledge
Autopsychological competence in the field of advantages and disadvantages of the teacher's activity and personality

Source: Adapted from Fakhrutdinova et al. [40] (p. 86).

This whole teaching–learning process in a context of internationalization of the curriculum and in a logic of development of intercultural competences by the students involves substantial changes in the role that the teacher plays. This actor is no longer the center of the pedagogical process and ascribes this role to the student, who should be motivated and proactive. The teacher is no longer the dominator and becomes the mediator, whose main role is to organize the students' learning process, always based on the mastery of foreign language and multicultural teaching competences [10,14,38].

However, according to Zapp and Lerch [8], this is not always the case. The authors state that "Teachers or program directors apparently do not adapt their study profile to international students, nor do students seem to be attracted by an international offering" [8] (p. 388), which, obviously, places constraints on the effective internationalization of the curriculum and points toward the need for HEIs and their actors to further develop their competences in this field.

However, this path toward internationalization of the curriculum by HEIs, albeit still relatively underdeveloped, is unavoidable if they are to be sustainable as educational institutions, as internationalization of the curriculum is becoming increasingly relevant at the European and global levels [41] (p. 6). According to the author, this process is composed of two fundamental dimensions:

The bottom half of the framework is concerned with the layers of context (institutional, local, regional, national and global), which create a set of conditions influencing the design of an internationalized

curriculum. The top half of the framework is concerned with curriculum design and identifies its three key elements: requirements of professional practice and citizenship, assessment of student learning and systematic development across the program with all students developing intercultural and international knowledge, skills and attitudes.

The internationalization of the curriculum, seen as the "incorporation of international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the curriculum in ways that are relevant to graduates' professional practice" [42] (p. 1693), is, therefore, highly relevant for all students in all scientific fields, preparing them for professional practice in a globalized world. This centrality has been proven, for example, in the field of health, with health events such as the Ebola virus, SARS, or, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. Wu et al. [42] (p. 1693) sustain that these global events

[…] have demonstrated the need for efficient international collaboration and communication in biomedical research, education, and patient care. Such global health emergencies require efficiency in international communication, culturally competent and expert healthcare leadership (locally, nationally, and internationally), rapid international public health action, and collaborative international biotechnology and medical science research.

In this whole internationalization process, it is important to take into account the local reality, culture, and institutional actors' perceptions regarding internationalization. For instance, in their comparative study, Yuan and Yu [43] (pp. 975–976) concluded that Chinese and international students' learning goals and experiences are different:

Due to their past learning experiences and projections about the future job market, the Chinese students adopted a pragmatic identity stance with a strong focus on their academic success, which overweighed the need for fostering their communicative competence through intercultural exchanges. For international students, however, they seemed to focus more on learning about Chinese language and culture with less attention paid to academic results as observed by the participants. […] This is particularly true when the Chinese students collaborated with international students of diverse backgrounds and learned to resolve identity conflicts and achieve their learning goals. Such intercultural collaborative experiences pushed them to reexamine their personal assumptions and ongoing experiences and take charge of their personal learning and identity building.

Hence, HEIs should analyze the local reality in which they operate, namely, in terms of the cultural roots and traditions, which may vary tremendously from one country to another and which have an undeniable influence in the internationalization of higher education. Teachers should be provided with professional development to engage in internationalization of the curriculum. Moreover, they should also "embrace both a global vision and local awareness and explore contextually appropriate ways to help students negotiate their identity paradoxes and seek their academic learning" [43] (p. 976). This is especially relevant inasmuch that, "Historically, institutions and graduate programs have done very little to support faculty development related to teaching that supports intercultural development" [13] (p. XI).

In sum, internationalization of the curriculum is being increasingly adopted by HEIs all over the world. Albeit there is not a "right" way to develop the process of internationalization of the curriculum, "there are pedagogical principles and approaches, technological tools, and frameworks for assessment that scholar-practitioners have found to be useful in the development of mindful global citizens and the support of intercultural learning" [13] (p. XII).

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to analyze the process of internationalization of the curriculum, specifically in terms of higher education. To carry out this analysis, the authors performed a bibliographical search, and the documents selected were examined and discussed throughout this piece of research.

The results allowed to conclude that internationalization of the curriculum is a very complex process, yet an unstoppable one for HEIs all around the world. From among the institutional actors, teachers are at the forefront of this process and play a very relevant role in its success. According to Zelenková and Hanesová [18] (p. 3),

> *The university teachers' role is to mediate—harmonize the relationship in the multicultural group of students and colleagues. That implies that the task of university teachers is not only to function in a role of a science-related content expert—ideally with a high command of the foreign language, and teaching a course in it. They are to master a skill of teaching students from various cultures in such a way, which can become a means of their potential reconciliation.*

This entails the need for the professional development of HEIs' teaching staff also in communicative and social competences, which are fundamental in the interaction that they establish with students [18].

Internationalization of the curriculum, being a paramount element of internationalization of higher education, has to consider, with special urgency, the dimension of adaptation to the cultural multiplicity to which it applies, on the part of all stakeholders. The analysis carried out in this piece of research allowed to conclude that internationalization of the curriculum in higher education is a complex process and involves various actors, with several challenges to be considered. For this process to succeed, institutional leaders need to be attentive to the cultural multiplicity that will be experienced in the classes where this internationalization of the curriculum takes place. To attain this purpose, internationalization of the curriculum with respect to cultural multiplicity involves a wide range of challenges that the HEI stakeholders need to address, such as the selection of contents, ways of teaching and evaluating, institutional, social, and political support—both within the organization and from outside—and a legal framework that fosters it [7].

In this process of internationalization, HEIs need to adopt an "Explor[ing], understand[ing], adopt[ing], and shar[ing]" attitude [7] (p. 23) in a new academic culture in which the digital cannot be forgotten, just as permanent communication cannot be overlooked, with the mobilization of various synergies among all stakeholders, without forgetting, of course, the students [44–46].

The internationalization of the curriculum also has social advantages, particularly in terms of social justice [4,5]. The author highlights that if HEIs are to achieve their goal of offering opportunities for internationalization to all their students, they need to involve all institutional actors in the process. Furthermore, "This [. . .] requires a systemic approach to the integration of international perspectives in socially-just pedagogy. Only then will the benefits of internationalization reach all students" [20] (p. 229).

It is true that "There is no one model of internationalization fit for all higher education systems, institutions, and disciplines" [47] (p. 12) and that the HEIs involved in this process have to take into account the local context in which they operate. However, HEIs, as learning organizations, can draw important lessons from the experiences of their counterparts if this process is to attain the desired and desirable success.

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