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Universities Inc.: *caveat emptor**

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Abstract

Universities have been marketised. The upsurge in promotional activities provides evidence of this. Considerable attention is now given to the corporate image of universities. In the competition for an increased market share of educational activities, be it conferences, students, endowments, research dollars, promotional activity is seen as strategic. University advertising is one such activity, and its analysis can provide insights into the divisions emerging in Australia's system of higher education. The advertising directed at prospective students is especially revealing in terms of these divisions; in addition, it reveals the degree to which university education has become commodified.

The bourgeois spiritualism with which Humboldt and Arnold invested the nineteenth century university have become promotional kitsch. (Wernick, 1991)

Winds of change have swept through our universities, replacing ivory towers with concrete blocks, making them more accountable (in every sense of the word) and their plight more subject to market forces. They have been unified, privatised and corporatised, and cajoled into contributing to the economic needs of the nation (Kenway et alia, 1993; Marginson, 1993a, 1993b; Watkins, 1993). In effect, universities have been subject to the same sorts of economic rationalism applied in other areas of the public sector as a Pavlovian response to the fiscal stringency of nation state capitalism and which has resulted in the partial privatisation of many public goods and services (Pusey 1991). Mammon now dominates the pursuits of scholarship, teaching and research, and the discourse of accountancy as applied to the corporate world has become the vernacular of the university. Clients, stakeholders, customers are all part of this commercialise or perish climate. What was an enterprise of culture now displays the features of an enterprise culture in which education is a commodity and like any other commodity it is subject to the discursive means of advertising copy. Although much has been written about the degree to which Australian higher education has come to be dominated by the imperatives of the market - and much of it is sycophantic rather than critical - there has been minimal commentary on the marketing methods delivered by a Dawkins led reformation. In this paper, we shall argue that one of the more significant features of the corporatisation of the Australian university is the degree to which advertising and promotion have emerged as strategic components in the marketisation of higher education.

Although it is not canvassed in this paper, one can see this as part of a broader affirmation of market forces and the assumption, dubious in the extreme, that they have the power to enhance the quality of education and its provision. Before their recent reformation, universities were not much in the public spotlight and when they were it was adverse publicity they received, in the main, as in the heyday of student radicalism, when university campuses were pictured as places where the morality and politics were permissive and libertine. This ill-gotten reputation needs to be set alongside the fact that universities were still places of elitism and privilege, whose graduates enjoyed the prospect of a secure future, and when a university credential was a valued asset in the acquisition of employment. In most cases, it was the quality of a degree not its institutional provenance that counted. What 'pecking orders' there existed among the pre-Dawkins universities were mainly centred on the alma of the alma mater with most status and prestige attendant on the older universities, and least on the newer and more provincial universities and the now extinct CAEs. What promotional mechanisms there were tended to be informal, and were reliant on the institutional aura emanating from a particular university, as its reputation seeped into public consciousness. Anything more forceful than this, was seen as crass and wanton commercialism, as having a "sleazy ring to it" (O'Brien 1987), which was at loggerheads with the image of a university as a place of privileged and assured standing in a nation's culture, where the disinterested pursuit of scholarship was protected, lest the spirit of free enterprise compromise academic freedom.

As that era recedes into a history cobwebbed with mystique, and is replaced by an era of "mass" tertiary education, a university education no longer offers secure prospects. While the historic mission of universities may be to launch economic recovery for "the clever country", their students are more immediately confronted with the problem of getting their fledgling careers off the ground. An unprecedented rise in tertiary enrolments over the last decade (Maslen 1993) means over the next five years or so some half a million graduates will be job seekers in what is already an employer's market. Competition is the overriding imperative amongst students seeking employment and also amongst universities chasing funds and "entrepreneurial" opportunities. In such a context, the profile of an institution and the differences to which it makes claim over its rivals become powerful attractors in the pursuit of enrolments and student numbers. That we have come to accept that universities like any other service or industry advertise themselves, in part, reflects a context in which the revenue base of the university is no longer fully dependent upon government subvention but must be sought for also in the market. But, it also reflects a context in which the promotion of institutions in a corporatised public sector, has become the norm in Australia and overseas (Davidson 1992; Fairclough 1993).

In a massified market, it is imperative that prospective students see that attendance at a particular university confers positional advantage on them over other graduates or will result in the acquisition of a qualification recognised by employers as exhibiting more workplace utility. One of the functions of university advertising and "imagineering", particularly that directed at matriculating students, is to make visible these advantages and provide a clear set of identity markers that differentiates an institution from others and embeds it in the scarcity realm whereby a degree from it confers superior occupational opportunities. Fred Hirsch's notion of "positional good" (1977), which roughly translates as "if everyone stands on tip toe, no one sees any better", provides a useful way of understanding the dynamics of scarcity in relation to public goods like education (Marginson 1993a; Hollis 1987). Higher education is not an absolute scarcity in the sense that works of art are; its scarcity is relative and "incidental" as access to it is subject to expansion, as has happened in Australian over the last decade, or contraction. As more and more Australians stand on the tip toe of higher education, so the positional advantage gained through undergraduate qualifications is decreased. In such an environment, where institutions are forced to compete for students in an otherwise undifferentiated and congested market, the way institutions are promoted, particularly when their funding depends upon student numbers, becomes a strategic element in student recruitment. As a university education becomes more available and its rate of exchange subject to inflationary pressures, it becomes imperative that universities seek to preserve their enrolments through influencing market choice in their favour.

Such circumstances provide a context in which institutional hierarchies are likely to arise, in which the value of the credentials of certain universities are ranked above those of others. We already are beginning to see the signs of this happening in publications like The Independent Monthly's *Good University Guide* (GUG), based on the Choice Magazine format, which first appeared in 1991, year one of the Dawkins reformations, and which is designed to facilitate informed choice - the basis of consumer democracy. With its plethora of league tables measuring the virtues of universities against one another on such grounds, mostly of an instrumental kind, as the 'starting salaries of graduates', 'which universities get you the jobs', it selects a 'University of the Year' and provides a list of university 'best buys' as well as a list of 'bargain basement' courses! (Ashenden and Milligan 1993) In conjunction with the Quality Review process, conducted in late 1993, from which has emerged the "first official ranking", as opposed, presumably, to that offered by the GUG, of Australia's universities (Healy and Robbins 1994), the national system is being calibrated and banded according to performance criteria. In comparing the two league tables, we note in the light of their frequent posturing about the deficiencies of the unified system, the degree to which the "Great Eight" dominate the official ranking. This is at the expense of the consumer chosen universities like QUT, Northern Territory and Deakin, which are relegated to positions further down the pecking order.

The drive towards institutional distinctiveness has provoked a flurry of organisational introspection and attention to public image, including the generation of mission statements and other forms of discursivity associated with corporate identification. Considerable attention has been paid to university iconography and the various items in which it manifests itself, from university merchandise like ties and silk scarves through to letterhead and prospectuses, to ensure that its display is co-ordinated and standardised, thoroughly modern and up-to-date. One notable feature of these changed signifying practices, indicative of the ascendancy of a corporate ethos, is the widespread use of logos and slogans - the corporate analogues of armorial bearings. In line with corporate practice, some of the newer universities, particularly those which have sought to modernise their image, have dropped such bearings and have adopted logos instead. These can take a variety of forms, ranging from schematised coats of arms to monograms, utilising vanguardish fonts and technicised forms. Such typographical reductionism evokes efficiency and a contemporary outlook, and constitutes an insurance against the liability of anachronism and fustiness inherent in armorial bearings. The practice is particularly prevalent in the universities of technology - where a contemporary iconography assists to affirm their futuristic and scientific ethos. Even the reduction of the names of these universities to their initial letters (UTS, QUT, RMIT) reflects the modernist preference for attenuated forms, devoid of ornament and flourish. But it also reflects the fact that the newer universities cannot hope to compete with the "traditionalism" of a Melbourne or Sydney, but must invent new traditions that accord with the different academic styles now emerging in the tertiary system as rival institutions attempt to capture the different constituencies and demographies in the higher education market.

This trend is even more evident in that other feature of modern corporate practice, the use of slogans as figure head devices. These reduce the key values of an institution to a quintessential statement that is memorable and catchy. This is achieved through an orchestrated use of university vernacular, with all the calculated effect of advertising copy. Words like "degree", "excellence", "opportunity", "tradition", fastened together with tellingly used articles and prepositions, form the copy of slogans, creating resonances of ambiguity that tease and titillate. The slogan is also a key component of the image projection process, appearing in the foreground of university promotional material, in its advertisements and brochures - a linguistic complement to the logo. Some faculties within universities have adopted the practice ("Arts - the critical faculty"). Slogans are a corporate version of the motto, and the values they instantiate align themselves to a different value discourse from that of the university motto.

In fact, the university slogan is as telling about the values of the university in the late twentieth century as the motto was about the educational values of the past. For instance, most university mottos align themselves to epistemological and moral discourses, approximating to the central components of the Humanist project (Synott and Symes, forthcoming). In these, the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge are key elements in the development of moral and ethical capacities (Scientia ac labore; Sapientia omnia vincit). In the slogans of the corporate university there is an almost complete absence of references to these discourses. In their stead is a conspectus of values which crosses a considerable range of themes, everything from New England's 'Learning in a Landscape' to James Cook's 'The University of Life'. Several of the slogans centre on the idea of a university as a place which creates opportunity and which confers value on education as an instrumental rather than intrinsic good. Griffith University prepares its students 'for a better future', which as well as appealing to self interest has a nuance of idealism echoing through its double meaning. Monash, on the other hand, seeks to appeal to a global rather than a local audience, and celebrates itself as 'Australia's international university', emphasising its proprietorship over this domain of education.

One of the side effects of this sloganeering is the degree to which it reflects the different types of university education which are emerging in the unified system. For instance, there is a group of universities, generally the older, more established universities, which resort to the discourse of prestige and which utilise words like "excellence", "tradition", which, in effect, signify that they are "real" universities, with an attested reputation for scholarship. Tasmania's 'Traditions of excellence' is an example. Some universities attempt to distance themselves from these traditions, which have a fusty image discordant with the pragmatic temper of the times. QUT's 'A university for the real world' is of this ilk, and represents a clear repudiation of the university as a cloistered academy. QUT might not be a *real* university in the traditional sense, but at least it has its feet on the ground rather than its head in the clouds. In this way, it is choosing to identify itself with a new category of universities : those that work for, rather than against the world, and that prize utility and functionalism above education for its own sake.

This reflects not so much an eclipse of the old order, but rather its alignment to a world in which the value properties of a particular university must be perceived to confer significant difference. Those slogans which lie outside this discourse tend to play on the vulnerabilities that a university might be perceived to have. RMIT, for instance, a university in everything but name, has taken as its slogan 'A Great Australian university' and, as if to reinforce this stature, carries with it the year of its establishment, 1887! Tradition, and the status attendant on it, is a valued asset, increasing the cachet of an institution. Think of the degree of advantage it confers on the Oxbridge graduate.

The university slogan spearheads a composite of image-formation strategies which can be divided according to the 'corporate audience' (Gregory with Wiechmann 1991) i.e. whether they speak to potential students or employers/investors. There are also markets within markets which require different imagineering practices within the use of the consistent livery, logography and mode of presentation prescribed by a university's manuals of policies and procedures. The student population, for instance: the undergraduate and postgraduate, is a burgeoning market in the 1990s, not yet 'massified', but on the way to becoming so as the credential scramble gathers apace; and the other expanding population is that of overseas students. Outside these are the more generalised demographies to which the university directs its corporate image and which centre on promoting the university as a place of civic and cultural importance in the life of a community. To this end, universities produce lavish brochures, copiously and glossily illustrated, showing the university and its environs at their most photogenic, and describing in the calculated hyperbole of modern corporate copy the university's achievements and objectives. Many of these brochures, particularly from universities in the remoter parts of Australia, in fact, are more akin to tourist brochures, and create the impression that the university is the heart of an ecological paradise, and that academics and students spend the majority of their lives on the beach and in the rainforest, rather than the library and the lecture theatre. The image shorthand through which such advertising speaks is both product and agent of a manipulative logic that values the surface and the surreal. On these terms the more lavish booklets destined in the main for employers/investors need not provide one clear image of the institution on offer when shots of waves and waterfalls, palm trees and sea shells can make the soft sell all the more seductive. The advertising which targets students however, particularly at the undergraduate end of the market, tends to be of the "hard-core" variety of persuasion.

The advertising directed at potential undergraduates addresses its audience more directly, and pays heed to its worries and expectations. Analysis of a sample of the student recruitment advertisements which have appeared in newspapers over the last three years suggests university imagineering has gained in sophistication since being placed in the hands of private agencies. Prior to the corporatisation period, university ads were informative rather than affective, with blocks of text arranged in a prosaic and congested manner. Since the commercialisation push however, universities have scrambled to capture a market through owning a particular style. In some cases this has called for quite desperate tactics, in almost all cases it has called for a rationalisation of information excess, and the ratio of text to image now favours the latter. The new age demands that the message be simplified and that the audience receive its short, sharp shock semiotic . This is about making an impression on the consumer in 25 words or less and locating much of the semiotic impact graphically (Fairclough 1993). Advertising etches itself on the memory by inventing a brand. Branding invents or exaggerates difference, creates a niche market, in the hope that consumers will identify with that particular brand construction. Within that market-oriented logic which has redefined tertiary education, the consumer can now choose from three distinctive brands of university (the tertiary system is precisely that, tertiary).

First, there are the "real" universities, often known as the "Great Eight", which celebrate academic excellence and the virtues of scholarship, which amplify their status as world class universities and as the upholders of the proper academic traditions. Sydney, for instance, trades on its reputation as 'Australia's first university' and its advertisements frequently contain shots of its Oxbridge-like architecture to graphically reinforce its traditionalism. Second, there are the "real world" universities in which pragmatism rules, which derive their standing from responsiveness to the corporate and industrial needs, whose goals are more concrete than ivory-towered, and which pride themselves on producing employable graduates. These graduates, together with their satisfied employers, often appear in the advertising of these universities, giving imprimatur to their unalloyed instrumentalism. Third, there are the "student centred" universities (ranked low in the system), the you-universities, which define their identity in terms of responsiveness to students and which provide personalised environments for them, where they will feel at home and where the lecturers are always available, and always care. Southern Queensland, one such university, makes much in its advertising copy of the fact that it 'believes in you' and that in a university 'you should be able to do exactly what you want to do'. Murdoch has recently turned to this approach. In a draft advertisement, dominated by a picture of a pig, it implies that there are sausage factory universities, which treat education like a 'production line process'. Murdoch is not such a university : it 'educates with care and personal attention' (Lethbridge, 1994). In effect these different signifying strategies recognise that mass higher education is a diversified endeavour, whose outcomes are various and different from the classical idea of a university education.

According to the dominant market paradigm such product diversity is healthy because it provides a choice. Yet it could be argued that in the race to secure a positional advantage through imagineering and branding, the university "hucksters" are manipulating rather than informing their audience. Moreover, it is prospective undergraduates who are particularly vulnerable. In many cases the message aimed at

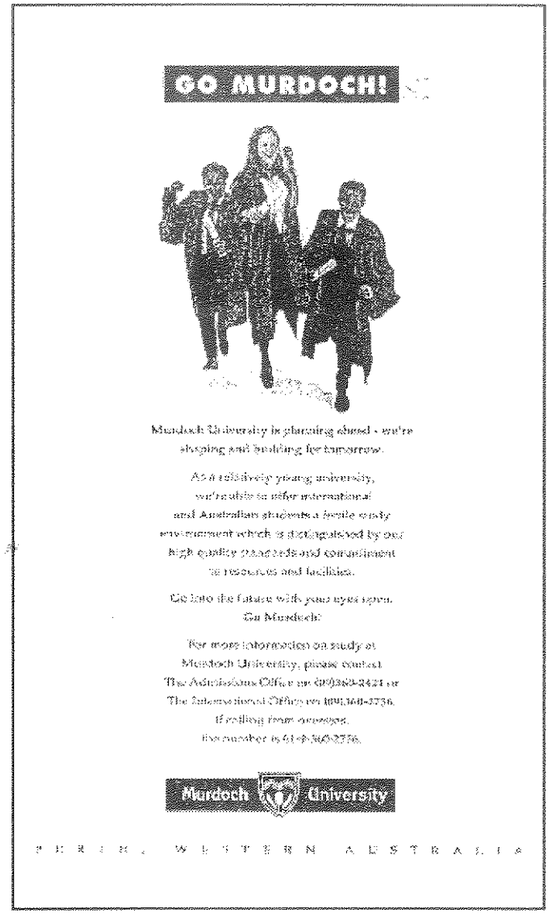

Figure One: Murdoch University advertisement

this target audience is essentially about eliminating choice: attend "university x" or face the consequences. The image makers know their audience is captured: they know that the young people within their target reach are anxious and uncertain. This is, after all, a time of record youth unemployment, and intense competition for university placement, a time of youth burnout and suicide, a time when year 11 and 12 students attend stress management courses (Bagnall 1992). Against such a backdrop the youth utopia offered by certain university advertisements may well appear irresistible. Ironically, students are led to believe there is no other choice.

Intentionally or otherwise, university advertisements aimed at undergraduates offer a mirror image against which they might measure themselves. Their compatibility with the constructed image positions them as either winners or losers. The 'Go Murdoch' advertisement which appeared in 1993 serves as an example. The graphic (see Figure One) shows three attractive (and they are always thus) young graduates jumping for joy upon reeeiving their Murdoch degrees. The sparse and centrally aligned text builds on positive words likely to appeal to its audience - 'young', 'ahead', 'tomorrow', 'future' - and the catchcry, 'Go Murdoch', is pure youthspeak, and is symptomatic of the 'informalization' typical of modern promotion strategies (Fairclough 1993). Undoubtedly, the advertisement is selling more than an educational service: it is supplying a context with which young people can

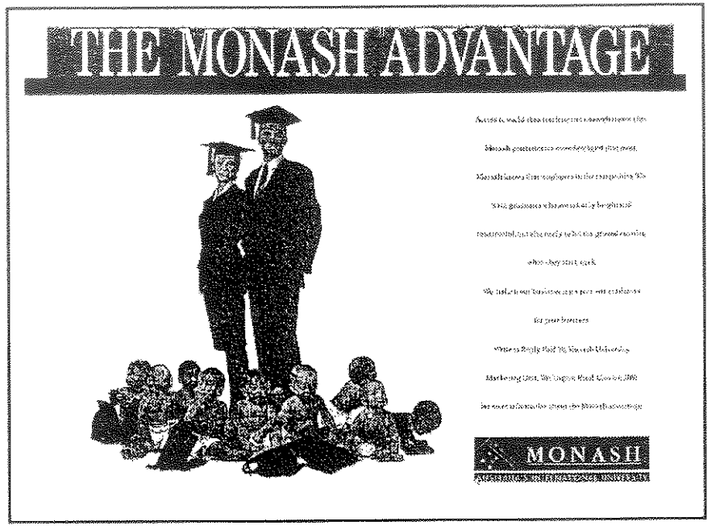

Figure Two: Monash University advertisement

Figure Three: QUT advertisement

identify and a fantasy into which they can read themselves. If students are anxious in the face of an uncertain future, the solution is, supposedly, because it is a university which has been planned with their future in mind, to 'Go Murdoch'. The payoff is a chance to charge into the future 'with your eyes open' i.e. to be confident instead of apprehensive. Like Toyota owners, Murdoch's graduates can gambol about with a generalised ecstasy knowing that their future is not one with which the institution has gambled. In keeping with advertising convention the message, which operates at the level of emotion first and rationality second, is simple: Murdoch graduates are winners.

Monash university has built itself a reputation as the "entrepreneurial pacesetter" of Australian higher education and consequently takes the market imperative to establish positional advantage, both nationally and internationally, very seriously. At least that is the impression generated by its advertising campaigns. Promotional booklets advise: 'Monash also leads in responding to one of the great challenges of the 1990s: the marriage of higher education and the private sector'. Certainly the values of the private sector are presupposed by the imagineering of 'The Monash Advantage' (See Figure Two). The graphic presents attractive super-students in corporate dress rising above their infantile peers. The text compounds the image, primarily with the assertion 'Monash graduates are more developed than most'. "More" is an important modifier in this positional discourse: the university has something more - a competitive advantage - and that more (something) is bestowed upon its graduates. The market demands competition: some must win, others lose. Through its signifying gestures the Monash ad, which is targeted at employers as much as it is to prospective students, legitimates this market rationality and restores the myth of the chosen few, an academic super-breed, destined to be prestigiously employed and socially prominent. The threat to the social order proposed by "mass" tertiary education is symbolically worked through here. The assumption holds that higher education can still be a pathway to elite privilege provided one attends the RIGHT institution i.e. Monash. Hence, Monash graduates are positioned as winners: they are the possessors of brightness and resourcefulness who 'hit the ground running when they start work' which is a symbolic code for other assets like wealth, power and status. According to these reference points of a competitive male culture, the un-Monash graduates are infantilised, and only able to play with their mortar boards. They are the losers: the powerless, the domestic, the raw.

The invitation to get more and get ahead at the expense of others is hardly new. Moreover, critical educators have long since identified schools as sites for admitting a small minority to the ruling class and excluding the remainder. With credentialism inflation, however, and the "clever country" expansion of higher education, the responsibility for sorting the minority from the majority has been shifted to the furthest reaches of the academic hierarchy, the university. All this is not lost on the new breed of educational image-makers who, in line with the predatory nature of market economics, sniff out and exploit vulnerability and weakness. As previously mentioned, tertiary/secondary students *are* well aware that they are running the race of their lives in the rush to acquire high rate of exchange qualifications. Nonetheless, Griffith University reiterates the point through sporting metaphors in one of its recent advertising campaigns. Radio advertisements introduced with 'Take your Marks' and 'On Your Blocks' position the undergraduate as a lone runner (or a lone swimmer) struggling to cross the finish line 'ahead of the rest'. Above background effects of a cheering crowd urging 'Go. Go.' the voice-over advises time spent at Griffith 'gaining an edge' because 'A Griffith degree will ensure you're first in line.' Significantly it is not the institution, but the consumer cum competitor put forward for scrutiny here. The undergraduate is prompted to consider their competitive performance and to position themselves as either above- or below-standard. Hence, the sporting metaphor individualises and decontextualises the problems of 'getting ahead'. Education requires time for critical reflection yet the runner has no time to spare. Education ought to expand the student's outlook yet the runner, of necessity, retains a tunnel vision. The sporting metaphor speaks to a less than bright future for the purpose and practice of higher education wherein educational concerns may be overridden by the demand for being faster and ahead of others.

As universities redefine themselves in market terms, the images they project of and for university students are increasingly constrictive and conservative, appealing to a laissez-faire free-for-all, where self-enterprise is the dominant imperative of the university student. Broader cultural claims to interpret and analyse the world are overridden by the instrumental demands of commerce and industry. One very slick and stylised QUT ad (See Figure Three), for instance, uses an attractive female student (with a smile that could sell toothpaste) to endorse its approach to learning because 'it works for me'. QUT's covergirl is happy to leave 'with a degree and a job'. Within positional discourse,

the two have become interchangeable and knowledge is reduced to its individualistic, utilitarian sense as a commodity to be acquired. Moreover, the student herself is a commodity - and in this circumstance an advertising cliche - to bear the university for the real world brand. We note that the one-dimensional imagineering of ad-speak tells us nothing about HER world i.e. the realities of student life. The only conclusion possible is that she APPEARS happy. Perhaps this fact has a peculiar logic of its own - after all, in a postmodern age, so it is said, appearance and image count.

One of the significant legacies of John Dawkins is the market-oriented university in which advertising is part of corporate practice, evident in many contexts, in newspapers and the cinema, on radio, buses, and television. The primary function of this advertising is to differentiate universities from their competitors, to brand them in such terms as they are perceived to confer a positional advantage. Much of the advertising is directed at prospective undergraduates. It casts universities as crucial institutions in the increasingly competitive race for occupational security. What is noteworthy about such advertising is that it rarely pays heed to the cultural benefits of university education. Advertisements are a poignant benchmark of the values prevailing in a corporatised and consumerised culture, showing in shorthand and technicolour the meanings and images with which commodities and services are associated. Those of universities are no exception, and show the degree to which the dominant meanings of university education are instrumental, are about getting ahead and gaining advantage over ones peers. University advertising, in the end, appeals to an ethic centred on competitive self promotion and it represents yet another telling symbol of the degree to which the consumerist values have colonised most sectors of western societies.

*** We would like to thank those universities who gave us permission to reproduce their advertisements and who sent us promotional materials which have formed the basis of this article.**

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