

QUALITY ASSURANCE OR ASSURING QUALITY: THE EXPERIENCE OF TURKISH HIGHER EDUCATION ON BOLOGNA PROCESS AND QA

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Abstract: This paper explores the rising importance of QA in HE contexts, and briefly examines the factors driving its development and relationship to the context of globalised HE. This paper draws attention to some of the rhetoric of QA in HE in global contexts, analysing the assumptions behind QA as well as the reasons behind the urgent introduction of QA into the HE context. Furthermore, it also examines the policy context and the policy drivers behind the development of QA in HE contexts. Moreover, this paper analyses the massification and globalisation of HE, and explores the impact of the Bologna Process on QA. This paper explores the introduction and influences of the QA process in Turkish HE, which provides a good example of policy transfer and highlights the challenges of transferring a UK-specific QA framework to a Turkish national context. In addition to the influences of the Bologna Process, this paper also highlights the effects of QA implementation in Turkish HE. This paper concludes the experience as; harmonization and standardization of educational activities via QA has presumably led to more diversity and heterogeneity across nations.

Keywords: Quality assurance, Bologna Process, Transfer of QA, QA experience of Turkish HE.

KALİTE DENETLEME: TÜRK YÜKSEKÖĞRETİM SİSTEMİNİN BOLONYA SÜRECİ VE KALİTE DENETLEME DENEYİMLERİ

Özet: Bu çalışma yükseköğretimde günden güne daha da önem kazanan kalite denetleme konusunu ele almakta ve küresel yükseköğretim bağlamında kalite denetleme olgusunun gelişimini etkileyen faktörleri incelemektedir. Bu makale aynı zamanda kalite denetlemenin altında yatan varsayımlar ve kalite denetleme olgusunun yükseköğretim alanına acil olarak yerleştirilmesi gerekliliğinin sebeplerini analiz ederek küresel bağlamda yükseköğretimde kalite denetlemesi ile ilgili retoriklere dikkat

çekmektedir. Bunların yanı sıra, yükseköğretimde kalite denetlemenin gelişimi arkasında yer alan politikalar ve bu politikaları yürütenlerle ilgili konular da ele alınmıştır. Aynı zamanda, yükseköğretimin küreselleşmesi ve kitleselleşmesi de çalışmanın kapsamı içerisinde olup Bolonya Sürecinin kalite denetleme üzerindeki etkileri de incelenmektedir. Çalışma ayrıca ilgili politikaların aktarımına ve İngiltere'ye has bir kalite denetleme sisteminin Türk sistemine aktarılması sürecinde karşılaşılan zorluklara iyi bir örnek teşkil eden kalite denetleme sürecinin Türk yükseköğretimine girmesi ve sistem üzerindeki etkilerini de incelemektedir. Çalışma, Bolonya sürecinin etkilerinin yanı sıra kalite denetleme sisteminin Türk yükseköğretiminde uygulanmasının etkilerine de değinmektedir. Çalışma, bu süreçten edinilen tecrübeyi şu şekilde özetler: kalite denetleme yoluyla eğitsel aktivitelerin uyumlulaştırılması ve standardizasyonu tüm Türk eğitim sistemine daha fazla çeşitlilik ve heterojenlik sağlamıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kalite Denetleme, Bologna Süreci, Kalite denetleme transferi, Türk Yüksek Öğretim Sistemi

1. INTRODUCTION

The development and implementation of quality assurance [QA] policies in higher education [HE] has become a central concern of higher education institutions [HEIs] across multiple national contexts worldwide. These developments signify new dimensions in our understanding of quality. They also raise concerns over how QA shapes HE sector, and thus require that we delve more deeply into the political and economic drivers behind such shifts in HE. The literature suggests a relationship between QA and the globalisation and internationalisation of HE; indeed, these have been seen as the main drivers for the introduction of QA in a HE context (Harvey, 2004; Knight, 2001; van der Wende&Westerheijden, 2001). The introduction of QA into the HE sector, as Morley (2003) states, has been justified by the expansion of HE across national boundaries. This has in turn led to increased demand for more rigorous and robust QA measures. In the education policy arena, QA has been introduced as a mechanism which can be understood as a transparent benchmarking process, and as a process ensuring common standards across different HE contexts (Seto & Wells, 2007). QA is thus assumed to operate with a more normative and static conceptualisation of HE processes, defined by preconceived criteria. The ostensible goals of QA may be accountability and transparency, to make operations more visible and efficient, and are usually intended to be implemented at the national level. Its processes and consequences have been shown to be varied, complex, and contested (Vidovich & Porter, 1999). Against this complex and contested background (Morley, 2001; 2003), there are important factors to be considered in evaluating different national contexts. Dale (1999; 2005) points to dramatic differences in the level of globalisation of QA and its transfer across nations. The manner in which QA

is implemented may depend to a considerable extent on nation-specific contextual structures.

2. GLOBALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION VIA QA: HOMOGENEITY AND STANDARDISATION OF HE

The underlying assumption of the homogenisation of the learning process depends entirely on standardisation, uniformity and homogeneity of performance in order to serve the mechanisms of transparency, audits and benchmarking (Ozga, 2000). Indeed, quality assurance is a generic term within HE, however, which contributes to a multitude of potential interpretations; put simply, it is not possible to use one definition to cover all circumstances, and what counts as ‘quality’ in any particular dimension—such as the acquisition of a specific skill, or the achievement of a specific learning outcome—assumes meaning in context-dependent ways (Morley, 2003; Sadler, 2009a). Morse (2006) has pointed to a noticeable implementation gap affecting the transportability of skills across national borders. She argues that the differences between nations and regions make the international standardisation of learning goals impracticable. In addition to the significance of globalisation, a review of the literature reveals additional complexities; QA processes may result in unexpected consequences and variations in practices. As such, the word ‘standards’ is employed in a variety of ways across Europe, ranging from statements of narrowly defined regulatory requirements to more generalized descriptions of good practice (Kohler, 2009).

Despite the ways in which QA has become associated with standardisation and accountability in the HE sector, particularly in the UK (Brown, 2000; Hobday, 2000; Newton, 2000), a range of research findings conducted from UK-centric perspective suggest the complexities associated with the impact of QA in and on HE (Morley, 2001; 2003; Newton, 2000; 2002; Henkel, 2007). Quality assurance policies may not achieve their presumed impact in improving teaching and learning outcomes (Harvey, 2010; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Knight & Trowler, 2000; McInnis 2000; Morley, 2003; Yorke, 2000). These researchers have also drawn attention to the actual QA practices and how these QA systems and their attendant bureaucracies and managerial propositions can be improved upon, as opposed to investigating solely how QA might produce improvements in higher education.

Rather than dogmatically observed standardised practices, the conjuncture of QA processes with the rise of economic and political concerns over the exchange and use values of HE have been argued to produce new organisational cultures and professional priorities (Morley, 2001; 2003). The extant literature addressing QA suggests a greater variety in practices than would be expected were the process simply a matter of the dogmatic implementation of externally-defined, preconceived criteria and normative standards. Following these introductory insights into the rising importance of

QA in HE and its complexities relative to that venue. Indeed, the effects of increasing economic and political interest in HE and the introduction of QA in the 1990s, first in the UK and then in other EU nations. Given that supra-national organizations have placed a high priority on the development of QA policies in support of common international development and implications of the European dimension for QA in HE in non-European countries have been challenging.

3. THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY AND MASSIFICATION: GLOBALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION VIA QA

Indeed the first and strongest argument in favour of HE from a modernist perspective is that it plays an important role in both socio-cultural and economic development (Lim, 2001; UNESCO, 1998). The economic and social value of HE is subject to considerable debate, particularly in countries like the UK, the US and Australia, which receive the majority of international students. Mainly by strengthening their existing capacities and broadening their offerings to meet the future needs of the emerging knowledge economy, European countries have witnessed considerably increased enrolment numbers since the 1990s, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe (Kohler, 2009). More pressing in the context of a knowledge economy, and given the ever-changing global economic forces affecting HE, is the globalisation of QA policy. According to Teichler (2004:13), the governments of these major 'knowledge exporting' countries are enormously active in shaping the rules of border-crossing commercial knowledge transfer in a way that maximizes their national gains. This has contributed to the sense of urgency surrounding the introduction of QA in HE more broadly, and more importantly, has helped to promote and make essential trans-national education policies, thereby globalising QA activities in an HE context, to some extent.

Globalisation has affected not only economic movement, but also academic systems (Altbach&Teichler, 2001). With the introduction of QA, partnerships have developed within countries, meant to contribute to the development of QA proposals and to achieve a better-coordinated pan-European QA system (HEFCE, 2006). The impact of globalisation and massification in HE has, however, led to diversified experiences of QA in HE. In particular, what has really driven the differentiation of QA within HE is the cross-border expansion and growing competition created by new forms of collaboration (Harvey, 2004; Knight, 2001; van der Wende&Westerheijden 2001). The underlying philosophy assumes that organizations such as UNESCO, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] have produced codes of good practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards (Amaral, 2007). Some authors, such as Billing and Thomas (2000a) and Billing (2004), have offered a pessimistic view of such partnerships, improvement-oriented evaluations and pilot projects in developing countries.

Most research into the application of QA now incorporates diverse interests beyond the traditional social, economic and political factors. As a result, QA has become increasingly complex, and is applied to increasingly diverse national-level processes. This Western-dominated international trend may not fully consider certain nation-specific aspects, such as technical considerations, and political, social, economic, and cultural dimensions (Billing, 2004; Lemaitre, 2002; Temple & Billing 2003). Perhaps the goal of bridging the gap, and the reconstruction projects of QA, can be interpreted and experienced differently. We may, for instance, be well-served to consider how, and to what extent, international agencies influence a country's HE system. For some, QA processes in the age of globalisation have created more diversity and heterogeneity in HE. The complexity is best described by UNESCO: the gap between the industrially developed, the developing and in particular the least developed countries with regard to access to and resources for higher learning and research, which is already enormous, is becoming even wider (UNESCO, 1998). For example, Ala-Vähälä and Saarinen (2009), in discussing the HE context in Finland, have suggested that there are considerable differences between the policy statements and actual practices of QA organizations, noting significant conflict between the two. Ala-Vähälä and Saarinen (2009) have argued that QA organisations are typically government-funded, and are therefore politically more dependent on the government than on the universities themselves; indeed, the underlying obstacle of economic dependence may contribute to the ultimate failure of international QA organizations. On the other hand, Robertson (2005) has critiqued the policy agendas of both the OECD and the World Bank, focusing on the overall efficacy of homogenizing OECD member countries such as Turkey, Japan, the USA, or Finland, despite the huge differences in their histories, economies and political situations. In other words, the criticism lies in the implications of QA as it increasingly interpenetrates the cultural, economic, and political situations of any one nation. Indeed, it seemed that the cooperation paradigm has become a competition paradigm, where rationales supporting QA activities have become more complex than the traditional duality of quality improvement and accountability would suggest (Amaral, 2007).

Many have criticized QA implementation, and suggested that such policies have not contributed to better coordination of trans-national education (Knight, 2001; 2002). There are various arguments explaining the negative effects of the globalisation of QA policy in HE. For Lemaitre (2002) and Harvey (2004), QA represents political action, and the way in which QA policies are transferred and processed is biased toward the interests of politically-dominant countries; by extension, the consequent practices ignore the cultural and socio-economic parameters of the targeted countries. As Lemaitre (2002) demonstrates, globalisation allows the economic power of developed countries to dominate the culture, politics, and economic priorities of developing countries. As compelling as this view may be, it is clear where the evidence for such conclusions comes from. Morley (2003) uses the term 'colonisation' for the

development of QA systems across nations, and argues that what is ‘global is multivocal, heterogeneous and unpredictable’ (Morley, 2003:1). For her, QA is the antithesis of the chaos created by the global expansion of HE. For Harvey (2004), globalisation is imperialism; similarly, for Dale (1999:8), QA is defined as ‘imperialism’ or ‘colonialism’, leading to the detailed criticism that external pressures and geographic influences have a variety of consequences and potential outcomes when inserted into national policy discourse. Green (1999) describes globalisation theory as uneven and its logical rigour and empirical grounding in policy borrowing as contributing to cultural diffusion. For him, cultural and contextual factors shape policy, and he suggests a convergence at the level of policy rhetoric and policy objectives. These issues relate to policy content, procedure, or intended outcome, and affect core institutions and the cultural values underlying them (Lim, 2001; Morley, 2003).

4. IMPACT OF THE BOLOGNA PROCESS AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

The Bologna Declaration initiated the promotion of European cooperation in QA. It set in motion a Europe-wide compatible and transparent QA system to accompany and structure the European HE space (Campbell and van der Wende, 2000; Kohler, 2009). The aim was to achieve greater compatibility and comparability within national HE systems in general, and to increase the international competitiveness of the European system of HE in particular (Harvey, 2004; Kohler, 2009). For the reasons discussed above, it was at first it seen as a positive, and the Bologna Process seems to rely upon an underlying philosophy that looks for ‘cooperation, diversity, flexibility, reference points, creativity’ (Amaral, 2007:11). Nevertheless, the Bologna Declaration has not achieved the expected benefits in terms of QA evaluations at either national or organizational levels (Sadler, 2009b; Vidovich & Porter, 1999). An important aspect of QA, however, is that, with a multitude of HEIs operating within different economic, political and cultural environments, applying the same standard measures across the board may not always be feasible or advisable. Ozga (2000) has noted that the flows of resources are unequally distributed both within and across nation states, and the impacts of the resultant processes are therefore experienced differently within different populations, since ‘globalisation is not equally global’ (Ozga, 2000:59). Nor is it evident that these reforms have altered the way in which literature reviews are undertaken. It is not yet clear what the nature of these policies is, whereby education is more overtly tied into national level policies and dependent organisational cultures.

It is therefore crucial that researchers do not neglect the consequences of QA policy and its implementation at both the national and organizational levels. In addition to the overt interconnections, for Dale (1999) it is dubious to expect QA processes to be interpreted identically across multiple national contexts Dale also argues that it might it be simplistic to expect the effects of

the globalisation of QA to be homogeneous. As Dale (1999) highlights, it is essential to recognize the significance of national societal and cultural effects, the prominence and importance of which have hardly been diminished by globalisation; the parameters of globalisation may alter the direction of state policies, but cannot negate or remove existing national peculiarities. Most countries have made an attempt to be part of this globalisation ethos, although there have been different, specific critiques made about the globalisation of education and knowledge. For instance, Dale (2005) has argued that national education systems are responsible for justifying and modifying their education systems. Dale (2005) discusses the features of policy decisions and processes at the national level, noting that they do not change the facts that:

a) decisions are still taken at national level but this does not necessarily imply that is where power over decisions lies, b) existing forms continue apparently more or less unchanged does not alter the fact that new forms, located at different scales, are starting to exist behind them, c) existing forms do not necessarily have the same meaning as they had previously, d) the nature and breadth of the areas across which international differences may emerge is narrowing under the KE (Dale, 2005:122).

According to Dale (2005), experience at the national level regarding the above disparities, and the values and purposes underpinning the knowledge economy, represent a considerable narrowing of the value of modernity. The equivalent parameters of transparency, standards, and evaluation structures are relative and restricted to when they are interpreted in national contexts. Both Morley (2003) and Dale (1999) argue that policy borrowing, policy learning, and globalisation effects are diverse rather than homogeneous. For Dale, policy learning is likely to be present in policy transfer, and the compatibility of 'policy learning with both traditional and globalized mechanisms' means 'examining how [policy learning] might fit into the different contexts' (Dale, 1999:10). This can be traced back to the imperatives of social, cultural, and structural differences in the targeted countries, as noted by both Dale (1999; 2005) and Lim (2001). Attempts to transfer QA procedures used in the UK HE system to developing nations has proven challenging (Lim, 2001).

5. TRANSFERABILITY AND HARMONIZATION OF QA: THE EXPERIENCE OF TURKISH HE

Higher education QA measures were adopted in Turkey in the late 1990s, when the Turkish Ministry of Education and YÖK sought to adopt the criteria of the Sorbonne (1998) and Bologna (1999) Declarations in its HE quality management and accreditation systems (Mızıkacı, 2003). Turkey became a signatory to the Bologna Declaration in 2001, although the legal effort to develop a national QA agency only came to fruition later, in 2005. Mızıkacı (2005) discusses the impact of the Bologna Process on Turkish HE, observing that the Bologna Process is generally appreciated but that the associated

implementation instruments are, unfortunately, not yet sufficiently supported at the national level. Public universities in Turkey are largely dependent on government funding, whereas private universities are autonomous and able to rely on their own financial resources. It can therefore be seen that, in private universities, implementation and adaptation of QA processes followed quickly, while state-funded universities first had to take advantage of the opportunity to open up new revenue streams, for instance through cooperative programmatic and research activities (Mızıkacı, 2005). The Turkish HE system is highly complex, and tracing the development of the key educational policies and reforms is a necessary task prior to advancing any arguments. At its core, the Turkish education system can be quite conservative and highly centralised in addressing managerial issues (Mızıkacı, 2005). This constitutes both a control and a constraint, and so questions of autonomy are inherent to Turkish HE.

As discussed above (Dale, 1999; 2005; Lim, 2001), the transfer of QA frameworks to external contexts often proves problematic. The experience of Turkish HE in adopting the UK model of QA has been similarly problematic. As Billing and Thomas (2000a) note, Turkish HE had not previously developed its own QA systems, measures for institutional accreditation, or external examining. As part of Turkey's integration process with the EU, some government agencies have been appointed to cooperate with European agencies, including the World Bank and British Council. Billing and Thomas (2000a) conducted a pilot project examining the transfer of UK QA policies to Turkish HE. This led Billing and Thomas (2000a) to identify critical concerns, such as cultural, structural, political, and technical issues. In addressing cultural issues, the authors raised the issue of familiarity and noted that the question of staff seniority affected the pace and evaluation of the study (Billing & Thomas, 2000a; Brennan & Shah, 2000). The most significant obstacle lay in the cultural and contextual differences, and factors at both the national and organisational levels suggested that these should have been addressed more explicitly (Billing & Thomas, 2000a; 2000b). The Turkish HE system is markedly different from its British counterpart. In the UK, academics have a considerable degree of autonomy in decision-making processes, while in Turkey this can be seen as an inherent source of tension (Billing & Thomas, 2000a, 2000b; see below). As pointed out by Billing and Thomas (2000a), the transferability of QA systems between nations requires consideration of a range of issues, including the cultural dimension and questions of the relative autonomy enjoyed by the national education system of the targeted country.

Billing and Thomas (2000b) provided detailed data evaluating QA practices based on a modified UK model as applied to Turkish HE, arguing for a net positive impact on the assessment and evaluation of teaching and learning quality. The academics who took part in this project recognised the importance of internal university QA and of staff development for any quality improvement initiatives (Billing & Thomas, 2000b). Building on this insight, the project has also raised significant issues to be addressed in any national

level QA process conducted in Turkey, including: time-scale, cultural and structural differences, and communication difficulties. Billing and Thomas (2000b) show that, all too often, the economic situation, the culture of the adopting country, and the practical, socio-economic, and cultural dimensions are ignored. The manner in which QA is imported and interpreted in the adopting countries differs significantly. This is also highlighted by Lim (2001), who reported that in developing or low-income countries, the lack of facilities, lack of staff development, and lack of academic freedom in institutional structuring contribute to the demanding circumstances.

Another international research project touching upon Turkish HE, a longitudinal case study conducted by Hergüner and Reeves (2000), examined the relationship between national culture and corporate culture. Total quality management was adopted as a QA assessment system, but the authors concluded that attempts to adapt QA systems from other countries might introduce unforeseen difficulties, and that total quality management systems should be capable of being adapted to the cultural patterns of that country, rather than introducing pressures and attempting to impose organisational change on national cultural patterns (Hergüner and Reeves, 2000).

Borahan and Ziarati (2002) have evaluated the developments and impacts of QA on Turkish HE, noting that, unlike is observed in developed countries, there is an urgent need to establish a QA system and forms of control in developing and newly industrialised countries. In an extensive study based on the tradition of developing a quality criteria checklist, Borahan and Ziarati (2002) developed an International Standardization Organization [ISO] metric, similar to the Total Quality Management [TQM] model. The authors held a positive view of the potential of TQM to assess QA in HE. Borahan and Ziarati (2002) mainly focus on the development of an ISO-based approach to TQM. The TQM application of ISO seeks to identify key criteria in quality assessment and control in HE. Some of the questions were critical, such as:

- Can the existing practices or models of quality systems or TQM be exported? Or are they culture-bound?
- Can a quality assurance and control model used in any country be implemented in Turkey? Or should we consider a model being used in a newly industrialised country which is at a development stage similar to Turkey, such as South Korea, which has recently become a member of the OECD and has established a major textile industry? (Borahan and Ziarati, 2002: 918).

Mızıkcı (2003) also used the UK TQM assessment method in discussing the challenges of adapting TQM to the assessment methods currently used in Turkish HE, arguing that the transformation of the industry-based concept may lead to improved ability to evaluate and assess institutional activities. She also argued, however, that the applicability and transferability of key quality management concepts should be considered by educational organisations, adding that ‘the concepts of ISO 9000 cause misapplications in educational

institutions adapting these quality assurance standards' (Mızıkacı 2003: 104). Mızıkacı (2003) had previously criticised this management-based assessment model, as its implementation is seen to rely on control and direction by management processes and recording systems in the educational context. Mızıkacı (2003) also indicates that the use of ISO 9000 standards has led to conflict in the implementation of certain major areas, such as course structure-including design, practice, materials, and assessment-the teaching and learning environment, and programme evaluation. From a post-structuralist vantage-point, and supporting the arguments made above, Morley and Rassool (2000) and Morley (2003) have stated that TQM is derived from an industrial model, and experience has shown that adopting a policy borrowed from a business environment to be implemented in an educational setting introduces unique problems. Morley and Rassool (2000) query the model's positivistic understandings, its discursive impacts, and its ultimate effect on educational activities. Morley and Rassool (2000) have indicated that quality needs to include consideration of equity and social values, and therefore should be contextualised in relation to aspects such as community needs, social formations, and employment conditions.

Turkish HE has tried to follow the QA initiatives contained in the Bologna Process, although implementation has proven challenging. Mızıkacı (2005) documents the positive impacts of the Bologna Process but concludes that, although the response by YÖK to the imperatives of integration and mobility have been positive and supportive, the international dimension of HE mobility is in its early stages, and is developing fairly slowly. Mızıkacı (2005: 77) also expresses concern that Turkish HE:

[Has] adopted European and international mobility schemes unreservedly. Many universities naturally require more time and resources to complete their preparation period, and striking regional disparities remain in both quality and funding. For example, not all universities have balanced commitment to both teaching and research; teaching is more emphasized in the majority of institutions.

Mızıkacı (2005: 77) also identifies a lack of clarity in the process; for example:

- Clearly-defined national policies and their implementation regarding internationalisation and mobility are unavailable, all the more so in light of globalisation's ever changing constraints and opportunities;
- There has been no observable increase in the state budget allocations for higher education and research for the last decade;
- There is a lack of systematic data collection on mobility and internationalisation issues in general.

There are serious concerns surrounding transferring and totalising QA in the educational settings of different national contexts. International QA

proposals have faced challenges of cultural inheritance, socio-economic parameters, lack of facilities and funding of national level contexts (Dale, 1999; Lim, 2001; Robertson, 2005).

6. CONCLUSION

This paper explores and analyses globalisation of HE and Bologna Process. This paper explores the challenges of trying to harmonize education through Bologna Process and QA; which have been accepted as an aim to unify higher education. Indeed, QA can be interpreted differently and the implementation of QA has created more diversity and heterogeneity. This paper explores these challenges and complexity of trying to standardize HE via globalization. This is best explained by making reference to diversity and heterogeneity in HE created by globalization in HE in different educational context. Primarily, the main aim of this paper is to make indications of how QA is introduced in Turkish HE and explores the challenges of this introduction. The introduction and influences of the QA process in Turkish HE which provides a good example of policy transfer and highlights the challenges of transferring a UK-specific QA framework to a Turkish national context (Mızıkacı, 2005; 2003; Borahan and Ziarati (2002; Hergüner and Reeves, 2000). There appears to be an implementation gap between international QA policies at the national and organizational levels, stemming from the limitations of the contexts in which the policy discourses (QA) are constructed. This paper has concluded that the idea of harmonization and standardization of educational activities has presumably led to more diversity and heterogeneity between and across countries.

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