Academic programme co-operation in South African higher education: imperatives, challenges and threads

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ABSTRACT
Since 1994 policy documents and initiatives such as the NCHE document (NCHE Report 1996), the White Paper (RSA DoE 1997), the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, the National and Institutional Planning Framework 1998, proposed not only regional co-operation between various higher and further education institutions but also the need for academic programme co-operation between institutions whether on a regional or interregional basis. The rationale behind this initiative is to encourage the development of regional partnerships as means for, amongst others, to reduce the overlap and duplication of existing programme provision in certain regions and to enhance the articulation of programmes and mobility of learners between institutions as described by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) (RSA 1998). But even more critically, regional programme collaboration could be one way of transcending the current divides in the higher and further education system, and could become a “harbinger of new institutional and organisational forms” (RSA DoE 1997:18).

The purpose of this article is to furnish insight into the rationale, challenges and quandaries of academic programme co-operation and to describe, as a case study, the progress made by an initiative to develop and implement an interinstitutional Masters’ programme in higher and further education studies.

THEORETICAL AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS URGING ACADEMIC PROGRAMME CO-OPERATION
A most applicable question to ask is why there is currently not only in South Africa but world wide emphasis on institutional, regional and academic programme co-operation. Partly it could be attributed to globalisation where geographical and institutional boundaries are disappearing. We are possibly moving towards a global higher education environment in which institutions will put their resources and strengths together to enhance the quality of what they are doing. From a pragmatic point of view one realises the limited resources in South African higher education. The existing resources need to be utilised optimally as we, as a developing country, cannot afford to have a decrease in the numbers of competent, higher education trained professional and knowledge workers. Besides, the economic realities of South Africa urge one to rethink how we can...

INTRODUCTION
In spite of various appeals by the Ministry of Education and policy documents to embark on regional institutional co-operation little progress can be recorded in this area. The latest National Plan for Higher Education (DoE 2001) will hopefully soon give momentum to institutional and academic programme co-operation. However, until now, academics were rather reluctant to engage in such endeavours. One reason could be that institutions and individuals are overwhelmed by the abundance of policy proposals in basically all spheres of the South African society. The intentions of most of these policy initiatives are valuable and necessary to bring about change in the South African society. The problem, however, lies rather in the implementation of these policies. The authors are of opinion that the danger exists that we could fail in creating a national, regional and institutional vision of higher education if we are not able to implement it. It is therefore imperative that the relevance and application of policies and change should be evaluated critically and where necessary, be adapted.

The relevance of this article, besides of providing a theoretical explanation of academic programme co-operation, is to illustrate how policies can be put into practice.
can enhance the quality of academic offerings and ensure greater accountability to all stakeholders.

Another reality that should not be negated is that of declining student enrolments. The impact of HIV/AIDS in terms of student intake, retention and throughput rates still have to be ascertained. If declining student numbers become the norm, it will oblige academic and other forms of collaboration between institutions.

**BENEFITS OF ACADEMIC PROGRAMME CO-OPERATION**

To persuade academics to deal with the uncertainties and accompanied frustration of planning and implementing academic programmes co-operation in (inter)regional consortia (nationally or provincially) they must be convinced that the benefits are more than the possible barriers. Those in favour of academic programme co-operation pose favourable arguments such as that co-operation will protect and/or increase quality, sustain vitality, broaden access for students, provide diversity in curricula and create economies of scale and therefore enhance financial sustainability. For the purpose of our discussion we identified benefits entailed for academic programmes, staff, shared resources, physical infrastructure, recruitment and retention.

**Programme benefits**

In the first instance it could be argued that small and even big higher and further education institutions benefit by co-operation by being able to prove that their programmes are of the “best standard” because they were designed by recognised experts and peers in a team effort from subject/(multi-)disciplinary knowledge to teaching learning methodology and techniques. It does not only create better programmes, but also more programmes that create more opportunities for students at all institutions.

**Benefits for staff**

Co-operation ensures a bigger cohort of staff available in specialised fields, at least as guest lecturers or advisers, in an information technology format of some kind that might be arranged. A far more diverse range of mentors and tutors or advisors for all programmes are available. Just think about the grave problem of staff replacements due to illness in small programmes and specialised fields. The issue of role models for students in diverse cultural settings in most institutions might sound old fashioned, but cannot be educationally disregarded in our advantaged/disadvantaged, and equity situation in South Africa. Faculty exchange enables the institutions to address curricular gaps as well as to offer courses in specialised areas without adding positions whilst faculty seminars foster ideas for new courses and discussion of new pedagogy and provide an internal form of professional development for those moving into new areas of scholarship.

**Benefits for shared resources and physical infrastructure**

Shared research facilities provide cost effective means of giving faculty and students access to equipment they might not otherwise have at their disposal, and provide a cost effective response in matters of acquisitions and holdings for the sciences. Library co-operation can in addition produce an integrated, automated system that constitutes a unified catalogue of the collections and a “virtual” campus library with holdings comparable to those of major institutions.

**Benefits for recruitment and retention**

Enhancements to recruitment and retention might enhance economies of scale in terms of enrolling not only enough undergraduates and graduates but also more students from disadvantaged groups in rural and even urban areas. More international students, more full time and part time staff as well as more Fellowship Programmes for disadvantaged scholars might be further spin offs. The potential of affordable joint student field research trips and student symposia also exist.

Certain colleagues might reason that some of the so-called benefits might not be benefits for my “world class” institution or programmes in South Africa and it might be true in exceptional academic programmes in a very few higher education institutions in South Africa. Let us complicate the issues even more by asking the question: What can we do together that we might not otherwise do? The following arguments serve as explanation:

- In areas of academic need we can have a variety and range of curricular offerings; more years of study in specialised areas; resource based learning and self instruction. Co-operative programmes have the potential to offer multiple levels of instruction and better articulation possibilities.
- We can have viable undergraduate area studies programmes with notable curricular depth and breadth.
- It is always easier to share risk in exploring new and potentially costly areas of knowledge and it is easier to develop a cost effective means to manage risk (eg by joint appointments, programmes to address in an increasingly interdependent and interconnected world and fund raising efforts on
behalf of regions of interinstitutional projects and programmes netted from outside sources.

- Through interinstitutional co-operation, the participants gain an opportunity to address a second tier of priorities that might otherwise remain on a back burner for lack of funding or staff.
- Re-training and staff development can be so much more enriching, efficient and cost effective if we work together.
- Participation in the regional purchasing consortium joint purchasing can only benefit academic programmes.
- Better and bigger academic programmes can relate better to the needs and issues of communities.

How positive above may sound, there are obvious various counter arguments that might exist. Advocates for academic programme co-operation should, however, take cognisance of the following possible barriers that might impede collaboration. Surely, innovative solutions will have to be found to ensure that academic programme co-operation will not stay lip services but are implemented and becomes a reality.

POSSIBLE BARRIERS AND CONSTRAINTS IN ACADEMIC PROGRAMME CO-OPERATION

Van Koller and Davey (1999:1) identified in their case study certain barriers that might impede academic programme co-operation. Table 1 provides an overview of such barriers and asks critical questions that should be dealt with when considering academic programme co-operation.

Table 1 drew on the possible problems envisaged for the technikon and technical sector. These potential problems are discussed in the following paragraphs in depth as they are indeed actual.

SPECIFIC PROBLEMS ENVISAGE FOR THE TECHNIKON AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE SECTOR

Technikons are still bound by the Certification Council for Technikon Education (SERTEC) and the Committee for Technikon Principals (CTP) arrangements in the introduction of new programmes. SERTEC plays a decisive role in the way in which programmes are to be introduced, offered and assessed as well as in the involvement of external examiners.

Currently all programmes at technikons are to a certain extent still influenced by NATED 151 while programmes applicable to universities are still influenced by NATED 02 116 (1987). In terms of the types of programmes offered, technikons can only offer BTech Degrees and only after 480 credits (4 years), while universities can award different kinds of

### Table 1
Possible barriers in academic programme co-operation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Possible barrier</th>
<th>Question(s) to consider</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutional autonomy</td>
<td>Will the institution lose its autonomy, and in the case of universities academic freedom? Which institution will have the final say and does the possibility exist that one institution will benefit more than the institution with less academic status?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional pride and status</td>
<td>Is the institution’s pride and status at stake? Will some institutions have to do away with their traditional programmes and way of doing things?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Universities versus technikons</td>
<td>How will be dealt with the great divide between what universities and technikons are suppose to do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University/technikon versus technical college</td>
<td>How will universities/technikons deal with technical college? Will universities play the leading role and technical colleges a subordinate role?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Providers vs non governmental organisations</td>
<td>What can be done to ensure that providers and non governmental organisations balance their interests, expertise and services provided?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional group cultures</td>
<td>What mechanisms and procedures could be implemented to ensure that both (all) the institutional group cultures are represented as far as possible?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspicion and distrust</td>
<td>What means can be identified to eliminate distrust and suspicion between the various institutions involved?</td>
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degrees after 360 credits (3 years) though not in the professional areas. Due to the different types of programmes offered the subsidy formulas for universities and technikons differ in the sense that universities receive a higher subsidy income than technikons. It would therefore be very difficult to exactly calculate the sharing of funding and subsidy (Fourie 2000).

Although national policy frameworks make provision for articulation and accreditation of qualifications, difficulties is still experienced with the recognition of technikon credits in university programmes. A reason for this is that Technikon instructional programmes are curriculated to provide suitable specialist employers for commerce and industry and not to articulate with university programmes.

One of the more controversial issues relates to the prevailing perspective that technikons are still regarded by some as being inferior to universities. Institutional co operation between universities and technikons is very often experienced as a take over and not as an equal partnership.

In looking at the partnerships between higher and further (technical colleges) education institutions in South Africa, co operative academic programmes also experience barriers and constraints here due to the fact that all technical colleges curricula are planned nationally and are sometimes outdated in our transformation context. These colleges have less status than any other colleges or higher education institutions.

From above discussion it is clear that much planning still needs to be done to ensure the swift implementation of academic programme co operation. Between the same types of institutions it seems easier than in the case of different types of institutions.

PREREQUISITES TO CONSIDER IN THE PLANNING OF ACADEMIC PROGRAMME CO-OPERATION

In analysing the possible barriers that might inhibit academic programme co operation the authors identified certain inclinations. By being proactive and informed, institutions could prevent mistakes by drawing on the following issues.

- The recognition of differences in institutional cultures

It seems imperative to realise and to have patience with the difference of institutional cultures, pride, capacity and reputations while establishing collaboration with an own purpose and culture. This attitude should be involved in all programme planning areas of curriculum development, delivery and accreditation (quality assurance) between institutions.

- An interinstitutional steering committee and co-ordinator

The appointment of an interinstitutional steering committee to oversee the process represents one of the first steps. Such a committee with its co Ordinator/leader/manager could function on a schedule of rotation. It is extremely essential that such a person has sound leadership and management skills informed by in depth knowledge of the areas of study considered for inclusion in the co operative academic programme.

- Workshops for all participating staff

Workshops to inform participating staff about the proposed initiative and collaboration could be fruitful. Members could have the opportunity to brainstorm the initiative, identify problems, formulate ways of overcoming barriers and eventually take ownership of the process. As needs arise, further workshops could be run.

- Identify the initial programme(s) to start with

Consideration should be taken of which programmes to start with that could also set an example for other programmes to follow. Co operation at the master’s and even doctoral (coursework) levels might be a better place to start than in undergraduate work. The studies at this level are more specific and specialised, numbers are usually smaller and institutional administration less complicated. Academic staff exchanges and inter institutional seminars can be less formally arranged at post graduate level and can lay the groundwork for co operation expansion at the more complicated level of undergraduate programmes.

- Staff exchange

Various forms of staff exchange should be among the first tenuous steps taken toward co operation. The three forms of exchange include: overtime borrowing; straight exchange between departments or other support units; and released time borrowing. No extra funding might be needed to support any of these forms of staff exchange, although co ordination would be needed by a full or part time co Ordinator.

Overtime borrowing, the most popular and common form of staff exchange, is initiated usually at the departmental/unit level on the borrowing campus, in consultation with the line head, eg an academic staff member who agrees to teach an overload course at another campus must receive the prior approval of
his/her department chair and dean. In the interest of fairness, the institutions generally abide by a common overtime borrowing rate, scaled to the lecturer’s rank, for each course taught on an overtime basis.

**Straight exchanges**, far more rare than overtime borrowing, are arranged between two departments. The agreement is made, in consultation with the deans of both campuses, that an academic staff member from one department will teach one or more courses at another campus in exchange for the same number of courses from an academic staff member of a peer department on the other campus. Occasionally, the exchange is not consummated at both campuses within the same year.

**Released time borrowing** is utilised the least. It requires the lending department to free the academic staff member from duties at the home campus in order to teach at another. In this instance, arrangements are made between the two departments to compensate the lending institution for the release.

**• Establishing discussion forums/groups**

Co-operative funds should be available for events and programmes that bring staff from all participating institutions together over common scholarly, curriculum and pedagogic interests. Such forums/discussions, preferably be hosted and convened by the deans of faculties usually includes a plenary session followed by informal discussions in departmental groupings. The plenary session constitutes an open forum for discussion of issues that cut across disciplinary lines and have importance for all campuses. Speakers may include members of the academic staff and the administration.

These departmental sessions may be devoted all or in part to a follow up discussion of the plenary topic or to scholarly or staffing matters. The chairs in each group are expected to rotate from year to year the duties of convenor, who prepares a brief report on the discussion and submits it to the deans. These reports constitute a critical resource for developing new forms of co-operation. They may include suggestions for joint initiatives or requests for planning assistance from a member of the participating institutions.

**• Central funding**

There is no doubt that no co-operative academic programme can have any hope of succeeding if from the outset funding for applicable arrangements are not made available by the participating institutions and/or donor funding to allow for successful co-operative academic programmes. If all the participating institutions agree to a co-operative academic programme they should ensure the following:

- commitments of financial support;

mutually agreed to distribution of programme activities (teaching learning administration) on the campuses when and where appropriate; participation in planning;

access to activities for interested staff and students organised around the co-operative academic programme.

**• Joint appointments**

Joint appointments enable the institutions to share the teaching duties of scholars working in specialised fields or, on occasion, to bring to the campus experts of international stature. Normally, the joint appointments are awarded to a group of staff actively engaged in co-operation who can demonstrate that such an appointment will propel them to a new stage of co-operative endeavour. Joint appointments are usually made for periods of up to three years. On occasion, these might be extended for a second term. Several joint appointees, at the conclusion of their term, might accept tenure track appointments at one of the campuses while continuing on some limited basis to teach at the other institutions.

Joint appointees have office space at campuses where they teach, but are based at one campus throughout the period of appointment. The host campus, in return for providing benefits and housing, may receive an additional course or other portion of the appointee’s duties. Joint appointees who administer all or part of a new or existing co-operation academic programme may substitute administrative duties for some portion of their teaching. Joint appointments can be supported through a variety of arrangements. For some of these appointments, financial arrangements are shared between the institutions. In a few cases, grants from outside sources may fund all or part of the appointment.

**POLICY AND THEORY INTO PRACTICE: A PROPOSED MODEL FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AN INTERINSTITUTIONAL MASTERS’ DEGREE IN HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION STUDIES**

The remaining part of our discussion is an attempt to bring policy and theory into practice by describing a joint effort, initiated by the Unit for Research into Higher Education at the University of the Orange Free State to introduce an interinstitutional masters’ degree in higher and further education. As the focus of this article is to describe academic programme co-operation we only focus on the outcomes of the initiative and not so much on the processes we followed. Our model is not perfect and should be viewed as path finding work for a framework that would provide useful guidelines for institutions, departments or faculties. Obviously it should be contextualised according to specific institutional needs.
BACKGROUND TO THE INITIATIVE

Due to the increasingly complexity of higher and further education, institutions are facing many challenges (cf Barnett 2000:153) and pose new challenges in respect of the development of leadership and management skills. In the South African context the new political dispensation brought a new value system with principles such as equity, redress, democracy, non racism, non sexism, development, quality, effectiveness and efficiency, academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability (vide the White Paper on Higher Education 1997). Many academic leaders and administrators are being appointed some without enough previous experience in the management and administration of academic institutions and the development of national education. These people should be prepared to take on their new role in higher education institutions based on the White Paper and the Higher Education Act. This new situation makes leadership and management skills more important than ever before in South Africa.

One way of addressing the challenges articulated in the previous paragraphs and to foster capacity building, leadership and management development, is to invest in an interinstitutional Master’s Degree programme in higher and further education. The initiative was therefore taken by the Unit for Research into Higher to invite both universities and technikons to participate in the planning of such a programme. After various workshops and negotiations ten issues who could hamper collaboration were identified after which possible solutions were formulated. On the left hand side of Table 2 issues for concerns are listed. The right hand side provides guidelines on how to deal with the concerns identified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Possible solutions</th>
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| Access | ● Selection criteria should be applied uniformly at all institutions.  
         ● To be admitted to the Master’s Degree programme a candidate must be in possession of a BEd or another Honours Degree (or have been granted such status).  
         ● Candidates should be appointed in institutions of higher education as administrators, managers or lecturers or in branches of higher education (eg at SAQA and/or NQF and/or other related policy making bodies).  
         ● Candidates should have at least two years’ working experience of higher education institutions.  
         ● In the case of a candidate who does not satisfy these formal qualifications, a special motivation for admission in the form of a portfolio will be required. Exemption from formal admission requirements could be given on the basis of the recognition of prior learning by an expert panel who had considered the candidate’s portfolio.  
         ● Candidates should show a keen interest in the field and demonstrate an understanding of higher and further education.  
         ● Additional admission criteria such as interviews, evaluation of writing skills, etc could be set. |
| Marketing | ● An information brochure on the programme should be designed by the Programme Planning Committee to be submitted to the Steering Committee for approval.  
            ● This brochure could be supplemented with regional brochures designed by all participating co acting higher education institutions in a specific region.  
            ● Consensus between institutions need to be reached on the outline, design, wording and information included in the brochure.  
            ● The various institutions should share the cost of printing and design of the regional brochure.  
            ● Both brochures should be available at all participating institutions.  
            ● Regional initiatives should compile a list of institutions and role players in the region who might be interested in the programme.  
            Co acting institutions in a specific region might investigate the possibility of sponsors or bursaries for students. |
## Registration and administration

- In each region registration should be done at "an agreed upon institution" one institution which should serve as an "anchor institution" for this programme.
- This institution could perform this task for a period of three years (or as agreed upon) after which period this responsibility could be taken over by another institution in the region.
- The registering institution should receive credit/ acknowledgement for this task, eg 40 percent of the subsidy. The percentage of possible subsidy/ funding for the registering institution should be negotiated within each region.
- Marks should be administered by the "anchor institution".
- All administrative correspondence will be the responsibility of the "anchor institution".
- Administrative costs (eg postage, faxes, telephone calls, photostat costs, etc) will be for the account of the "anchor institution".

## Contact sessions

- This programme will be presented in a resource based learning mode. Students will receive all relevant material at registration, and will then have to attend tutorial sessions at their "home institutions", as well as regional seminars/workshops at one or more institutions in the region.
- After registration a contact person at the home institution will arrange an information session. At this occasion students will meet their tutors, and arrangements will be made as far as dates of tutorial sessions, seminar dates and assessment are concerned. The module development team will prescribe a minimum number of tutorials per module. Dates, times and venues can, however, be negotiated with students.

## Learning materials

- Module development teams consisting of one international and two national experts on that particular aspect of higher education will design learning materials. The production of learning materials will be done centrally, and might include audio and/or videotapes, computer software and printed material.
- Students will receive all learning material from the anchor institution upon registration.

## Student assessment

- Consensus on assessment criteria have to be reached amongst the various participating higher education institutions.
- Assessment should be done within the new paradigm of outcomes based education, using new ways of assessment such as continuous, formative and criterion referenced assessment. Portfolio assessment, peer and self evaluation strategies should be implemented and consideration should be given to open book examinations with the application of knowledge as a desired outcome.
- Assessment criteria should be discussed with students prior to the assessment.
- Assessment should be valid and reliable.
- Assessment should be done in a uniform way.
- External examinations should be part of the programme.
- Examinations will be written at the participating institutions.
- Tutors at participating institutions will mark assignments and examination scripts.
- A member of the module development team will moderate assignments.
- A member of the module development team, as well as another external moderator will moderate examinations.
- All students will write the same examination paper.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Possible solutions</th>
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| Programme assessment                 | In order to improve the programme, it seems imperative that the content of all modules as well as the administration of the programme should be reflected upon. This could be done by questionnaires that should be completed by all students at the various campuses. Students should be allowed to reflect on the following issues:  
  - The content/relevance of the modules.  
  - The delivery mode of the modules.  
  - Support for students.  
  - Assessment strategies.  
  - The formative nature of assessment.  
  - Feedback from lecturers.  
  - Correspondece regarding the programme.  
  - Administrative issues.  
  - Applicability of the modules in real life context.  
  - Language use in learning material.  
  - Supervision.  
  These questionnaires could, if necessary be followed up by interviews.                                                                 |
| Form of learnership/ internship/ co-operative learning | The following issues pertaining to a form of learnership should be clarified:  
  - The role of the students’ workplace in this regard: how suitable and “willing” is the workplace to create an environment conducive for co-operative learning?  
  - Programme planners will have to negotiate with the various institutions what the outcomes of the learnership should be and roles of mentors must be clarified in advance.  
  Assessment of learnership should be clarified in advance and negotiated with students and the workplace/mentors. |
| Script/mini-dissertation             | The following needs to be discussed:  
  - The length.  
  - The outcomes.  
  - Assessment.  
  - Tutors at the participating institutions will act as supervisors for students.  
  - To ensure that students receive supervision from an expert in a specific field, supervisors will arrange meetings/telephone conferences/e mail support from relevant national/international experts.  
  - Team research could be considered.  
  - Mini dissertations will be examined by a minimum of one internal and one external examiner. Internal examiners are to be appointed by participating institutions and external examiners are to be appointed by the anchor institution.  
  - Subsidy for research publications emanating from students’ research needs to be negotiated among institutions. |
| Certification                        | Certification will be done by the anchor institution.  
  - If possible, the names of all the participating institutions in the region will be indicated on degree certificates.  
  - Degrees will be conferred at the graduation ceremony of the participating institution.  
  - Issues that still need to be negotiated include for example: How will subsidy be divided? |

In the last instance we identified possible role(s) of the anchor institution (the institution that takes the primary responsibility for the programme at a specific stage) and for the participating institutions. This is to ensure that all role players will know what their responsibilities are and what are expected from them.
ACTIONS PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

To ensure on the one hand the financial sustainability of this initiative, and, on the other hand the quality of the programme content, the necessity to obtain funding for the further development and implementation of the programme was realised. In order to curriculate the programme and to develop quality learning materials and study guides, funding was applied for. It can be reported that funding for the curriculum planning and design and the development of study guides for the various modules was obtained and that this initiative is moving into its next planning phase.

SUMMATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Bearing perspectives gained from our discussion, it seems abundantly clear that experimental practical projects seem to be the best way to deal with many of the issues in a “bottom up” approach that would convince national policy makers and even institutional leaders that certain changes and/or adaptations “top down” in national policies and financial support are needed. The guidelines provided by our case study should be seen as “guidelines” for cooperation that must be applied carefully to the unique contexts of different regions, institutions, programmes, departments and disciplines in South Africa.

REFERENCES


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