Student perspectives on going international

Literature review

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“In an increasingly globalised economy, opportunities to work and learn in international environments are not just a way to help students build their first CV, they also provide future graduates with the cultural, academic and experiential challenges that will help equip them with the life skills they need in order to thrive in the world beyond university.”

(Smith 2013, UUK blog).
Mobility Statistics

A 2004 study (HEFCE 2004) for HEFCE, SHEFC, HEFCW, DEL, DfES, UK Socrates Erasmus Council, HEURO, BUTEX and the British Council, found that:

- ‘Mobility is increasingly, and disproportionately, concentrated in pre-1992 universities. This category of HEI accounted for half of all outward mobility in 1995-96, two-thirds in 2002-03. Corresponding shares for post-1992 universities were 40 per cent in 1995-96 and one quarter in 2002-03. The small remaining fraction is accounted for by the non-university HEI sector.’ (HEFCE 2004, Executive summary point 10).

- ‘Only one third of the HEIs which responded appeared to have a specific plan for student mobility. Promoting outward mobility is secondary to increasing the recruitment of fee-paying overseas students.’ (HEFCE 2004, Executive summary point 11).

- Nearly half the non-mobile final-year students questioned regretted not going abroad.

- Among first-years, most interest was expressed in work placements or mixed work/study arrangements, rather than pure study abroad.

To what extent have things changed since 2004? A more recent study by King et al (2010) suggests little had changed at that point. They also found that ‘credit-mobile students are disproportionately young, female, white and middle-class, and are academic high-achievers, compared to the total UK student population.’ (King et al. 2010 p2). This was later echoed by Malicki and Potts (2013).

King et al. (2010) noted the severe difficulty of measuring the volume of student mobility, and observed the extremely low participation rates in the UK as found across the literature. They highlighted that many post-mobile graduates subsequently pursued a career or residential mobility abroad, which could be another reason for the difficulty in collecting data from graduates.

More recently, Joan-Anton Carbonell has sought to provide mobility statistics along with estimations of numbers in a range of categories for which no others are available. The most recent version of the report (Carbonell 2014) shows a continuing increase in outward mobility from the UK, both for study and work placements. It finds, however, that post-92 institutions still have lower mobility numbers than Russell Group and pre-92 universities, as was also found by King et al. (2010) and Sweeney (2012), amongst others. Carbonell (2013) observed that Erasmus mobility is becoming less dependent on language students which is a positive indicator of the potential for increased participation.
UNESCO and the OECD also collect data on mobility but only for those who are mobile for a minimum of one year. UNESCO records ‘internationally mobile students’ including distance learning students or those who have crossed a national border to study, while the OECD collects data on ‘foreign students’ (see International Unit undated). They therefore have a limited frame of reference in terms of our own study.

In its reporting to date, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) has only collected data on mobility periods of three months or more. However, beginning with the 2013-14 data, shorter periods of mobility will also be captured, thus enabling a more accurate picture. Figure 1 compares HESA, UNESCO and OECD figures for the UK for 2011-12 and the discrepancy in estimated numbers is clear to see.

Figure 1 Comparison of outwardly mobile UK student numbers according to HESA, UNESCO and the OECD. Source: International Unit (undated)
Institutional drivers for the promotion of student mobility

King et al. (2010) point to three levels of causative factors driving international student mobility:

- **Macro-scale** - economic and cultural globalisation and the internationalisation of HE systems (Erasmus being the main example);
- **Meso-scale** - institutional initiatives (mobility is more buoyant in research-intensive universities);
- **Individual-scale** - factors such as language competence, desire for adventure and employability.

Bridger (2015) claims that since the publication of King et al (2010) discussions on the benefits of outward mobility have increased its profile in the UK. She argues that the relationship between mobility and employability is encouraging thinking around the development of ‘global graduates’ (Diamond et al 2011), the take up of mobility opportunities, and the alignment of mobility with the broader internationalisation agenda in HE, ‘with the last two years seeing an injection of pace’ (Bridger 2015: p8). Bridger maintains that three key drivers for this can be identified:

- **The European Higher Education Area mobility target** of 20% outwardly mobile students by 2020, as affirmed in a range of government policy documents (such as BIS 2013) and the UK Strategy for Outward Mobility (International Unit, 2013) which resulted from the report of the Joint Steering Group on UK Outward Student Mobility (2012);
- **The global labour market** fuelling the need for graduates with an appropriate skill set for employment;
- The **Internationalisation** agenda as a UK government priority. In contrast to the focus on the financial benefits of international student recruitment, Bridger argues that:

  "there is increasing recognition of the role of mobility, as supported by the recently published Internationalising Higher Education Framework (HEA 2014), which refers to the benefits of internationalising higher education and of global learning experiences for an institution, its staff and its students"

(Bridger 2015: p9).
Known mobility drivers for students

‘Broadening Horizons’ (British Council 2014) found that the main non-academic drivers to study abroad for UK students were (in descending order of importance)

- I wanted to travel overseas
- To have a unique adventure
- Better employment prospects post study
- To build my confidence
- This is the start to my international career
- To become self sufficient
- Tuition fees are lower overseas than at home
- My family encouraged me
- My friends were doing it

(Source British Council 2014: p13)

Others, such as the Erasmus Impact Study (European Commission 2014) indicate that an enhanced CV and better employment opportunities are increasingly considered by students as a key driver to participate in mobility.

Predictors of propensity for ‘study abroad’

According to a HEFCE report on Student Mobility (HEFCE 2004), outgoing Erasmus students from the UK at that time were more likely to be younger, female, white and from families in the higher social classes, in comparison to non-mobile students. The report also found that those who had lived or travelled abroad prior to HE, for example during a gap year, were more likely to engage in mobility during their time in HE. (ibid).

Malicki and Potts’ literature review of 2013 found that students most likely to choose study abroad:

- Have higher grades
- Have better-educated parents
- Have stronger engagement in the first year
- Are more open to diversity and challenge
- Are female
- Are high academic achievers
- Are Arts, humanities and social science majors
- Are not first generation students
- Have participated in multicultural activities in high school.

(Malicki and Potts 2013)

Murphy-Lejeune (2002) proposed the concept of “mobility capital” which can have an impact on predisposition to mobility. This refers, for example, to previous international mobility (including of parents), exposure to foreign environments, living abroad or integration in a multicultural community. In a Norwegian study, Wiers-Jenssen (2011) showed that those who have studied abroad represent a select group in terms of social origin and mobility capital. So, as we will see later, while it seems evident that transferable skills and capabilities are developed through international mobility, equally it may be the case that international mobility programmes appeal to students who already possess, or have an advantage in developing, these skills.
As part of her study on the perceptions of academics on mobility, Bridger (2015) investigated different mobility types of two weeks or longer. Figure 2 shows the types of mobility offered in the responding institutions. As far as international work placements are concerned, Artess et al. (2015) note that the literature is dominated by reports on placements in vocational subjects.

![Diagram of types of outward mobility opportunities offered](Image)

Figure 2: Types of outward mobility offered in the UK. (Source: Bridger 2015: 28)
HEFCE (2004) reported that the main barriers for UK students wishing to study abroad include:

- Finance
- Language
- Lack of information (or having information too late)
- Actual or perceived academic/institutional barriers (course structures, credit transfer, worries over grades)
- Attitudinal factors (fear of the unknown etc).

More recent studies have tended to separate institutional from individual barriers. There has been a great deal of study on these and the relevant literature includes Brus and Scholz (2007); Barley (2009); King et al. (2010); British Council/YouGov (2011); Sweeney (2012); Joint Steering Group on UK Outward Student Mobility (2012); Souto-Otero et al. (2013); Malicki and Potts (2013); British Council (2013, 2014); Carbonell (2013, 2014); European Commission (2014); Bridger (2015); Artess et al. (2015).

Barriers identified in the Riordan Review (Joint Steering Group on UK Outward Student Mobility 2012) include:

- Internal institutional barriers to outward mobility, particularly with regard to credit recognition and quality assurance of the placement;
- The diversity of higher education institutions and student populations;
- The comparative lack of data on mobility in higher education;
- The need for a more flexible definition of outward mobility, to incorporate mobility periods of different lengths within academic year structures;
- Language and intercultural barriers for students;
- Widening access to and participation in study and work abroad opportunities;
- Financial barriers and portability of loans.

This is an important list as it led to the strategic objectives identified in the UK Strategy for Outward Mobility (International Unit 2013).
5.1 Policy barriers
Carbonell (2013) identifies declining language provision in UK secondary and tertiary education as one of the prime policy-related barriers to mobility. A further issue, according to King et al. (2010) is that the relevance of the Bologna Process in supporting mobility is not being taken seriously by universities.

5.2 Institutional barriers
Sweeney (2012) called for a:

radical and transformative approach to internationalisation that puts student mobility at the heart of institutional internationalisation strategies. This requires a fundamental and strategic commitment to establishing an institutional mobility culture."

(Sweeney 2012: p37).

The institutional barriers identified by Sweeney and also highlighted in other studies include:

- Institutional inertia and lack of commitment;
- Unsupportive institutional administration;
- Poor promotion of opportunities and availability of information;
- Accessibility of opportunity for ‘non-traditional’ students, including those with disabilities or long-term illness, students with children or those from lower socio-cultural or socio-economic backgrounds;
- The recognition of study periods, credits and qualifications;
- The suitability of a mobility period within the curriculum structure;
- Timing of ‘core’ modules required to meet programme learning outcomes;
- The student’s field of study;
- Module compatibility, module descriptors and learning outcomes;
- Examination and assessment structure.

5.3 Individual/personal barriers
In a study which aimed “to develop a better understanding of the barriers to overseas study as perceived by UK students and compare these with the US” (British Council 2013) over 10,800 US and UK students completed an online survey with some being followed up through qualitative interview. The main barriers cited by UK students were cost, concerns obtaining a visa, and difficulty leaving family and friends.

A similar study the following year (British Council 2014) found that 37% of UK respondents were considering studying overseas, an increase of 17% (i.e. up to 37%) on 2013 figures. This study found that fear of not fitting into other cultures (34%) was shown to be the greatest non-academic barrier to UK students studying overseas.

In descending order of importance, the main non-academic deterrents to study abroad in this study were:

- I don’t know if I could fit into a different culture
- I am not confident about speaking another language
- The cost is prohibitive
- I don’t want to travel overseas
- I am concerned about getting a visa
- None [it is interesting that 23% of students perceived no deterrent]
- I would feel unsafe in another country
- I am concerned about health care costs

(Source British Council 2014: p13)

Malicki and Potts (2013) reviewed existing literature on the outcomes of student mobility, and noted that students from ‘diverse backgrounds’ are underrepresented in study abroad and participation can be increased even before university by focusing on cultural and co-curricular activities at high school level. They note that, “exposure to different kinds of activities inside and outside the classroom contributes to the development of social and cultural capital for students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds.” (2013: p8). They argue that students carefully balance the cost-benefit equation and more risk-adverse students, particularly those from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds, often decide against mobility unless the gains are clearly positive.
Other individual/personal barriers identified across the literature include:

- Student diffidence;
- Familial obligations;
- Inflexible course requirements;
- Unsupportive faculty members;
- Poor language skills;
- Cost - not only direct costs, such as plane tickets and living expenses, but also indirect costs e.g. to extend their degree program if credit transfer arrangements are not clear;
- Loss of income while abroad e.g. losing a part time job;
- Leaving the student cohort and therefore losing friendships;
- Getting out of the UK accommodation cycle and complications over rental agreements.

It is interesting to note that the barriers reported here as given by students are largely personal, whereas the proposals for increasing mobility in Bridger’s (2015) study – which was a study of academic faculty not students, so could only include projections of student views and did not include them directly – are predominantly institutional/course-related (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 Perspectives of academics on how to increase participation in mobility (Source Bridger 2015: p44)
Impact

6.1 Measuring outcomes

In the United States in particular, a great deal of research and effort has been put into attempts to measure in quantitative terms the intercultural competence which it is expected will result from any kind of international experience. This may partly have been undertaken in order to justify such activity to what may be a sceptical or reluctant audience of students and, importantly, their parents. At the heart of what has become a commercial effort by some is the Intercultural Development Inventory, based on the work of Milton Bennett and his Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett 1993). The model identifies six stages of development from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism:

- Denial of Difference
- Defense against Difference
- Minimization of Difference
- Acceptance of Difference
- Adaptation to Difference
- Integration of Difference

The ability to measure intercultural competence in quantitative terms after what may be short experiences abroad is viewed with some scepticism by some outside North America, and the more qualitative focus of many western European projects on this theme contrasts with such a quantitative approach.

Bosley (2010) used both qualitative and quantitative approaches with her students on year-long study programmes. Her findings indicate that the keys to success are not only effective preparation of students and planning for what they will encounter, but also a series of staged questions of an ethnographic nature during the mobility experience itself to heighten students’ awareness of their personal growth and changing perspectives as the year progresses. She also identifies the importance of a re-entry programme both to counter reverse culture shock and to consolidate student learning.

In the UK, Coleman’s (1997) study indicated negative results for poorly prepared language undergraduates studying abroad, leading to increased stereotyping, ethnocentrism and prejudice. This led to a number of projects that supported UK universities in introducing elements such as ethnography and intercultural communication into university teaching as preparation for the study abroad experience (FDTL, 1997-2000 a,b,c). Artess et al. (2015) also warn against potential reinforcement of stereotypes through poorly set-up work placements.

Jackson has reported on ethnographic approaches that prepare students for shorter periods of study abroad to the UK (Jackson 2005, 2008). Her work with students in Hong Kong (2005) shows how their ethnographic writing skills can be developed to encourage reflection. Her research demonstrates “the importance of carefully planned preparation for the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of intercultural adjustment,” through self-analysis and reflection (Jackson, 2008, pp. 222 & 232).

Similar qualitative techniques have also been used to measure the impact of faculty-led study tours and other kinds of international experience, including service learning (e.g., Russell and Vallade 2010) and volunteering (Jones 2010).
6.2 Reported outcomes

There is an increasing range of literature identifying skills development and personal outcomes resulting from periods abroad. Jacobone and Moro (2014) found that mobility programmes not only develop personal skills but also an individual’s ‘cosmopolitan orientation’. Being well-informed, having a greater interest in global affairs and cross-cultural perspectives have also been identified in other studies (Crossman and Clarke 2010; Jones, 2010; Rowan-Kenyon and Niehaus, 2011). Furthermore NUS Scotland (2012) identified vision, independence, experience, a broader outlook and attitude as a result of mobility.

There is some evidence that beneficial outcomes can arise even from short forms of mobility (e.g. Jones 2010 and 2012), and Sweeney (2012) argues that such opportunities should be increased as a means of widening participation in mobility experiences. Again we should bear in mind that mobility opportunities tend to attract students who may already have such tendencies (Wiers-Jenssen 2011).

Studies identifying a range of skills developed as an outcome of mobility have been available for a number of years and include Williams (2005); Hadis (2005); Black and Duhon (2006); Crossman and Clarke (2010); Jones (2010, 2012 and 2013); NUS Scotland (2012); Gu (2012); British Academy (2012); European Commission (the Erasmus Impact Study) (2014); CIMO (2014); Jacobone and Moro (2014); Bridger (2015). Typically such lists consider a range of skills which we have divided into personal, interpersonal and employability skills.

Personal - Self-sufficiency/ self-efficacy skills

- Self-awareness
- Self-confidence
- Sense of identity
- Personal independence
- Resilience
- Patience
- Flexibility
- Adaptability
- Open-mindedness
- Humanity
- Tolerance
- Curiosity
- Coping with uncertainty

Interpersonal/people skills and intercultural competence

- Fluency, accuracy and appropriateness of language competence
- Mediation skills
- Sensitivity
- Humility
- Respect for local values without abandoning one’s own
- Forging of relationships and networks
- Challenging personal stereotypes
- Cultural relativism
- Cultural empathy and understanding
- Non-judgmental observation
- Adapting to complex cultural milieus
- Managing personal expectations

Employability skills (also known as transferable, transversal or ‘soft’ skills)

Various surveys of employers report that these are crucial graduate outcomes, possibly even more so than degree classification. The large-scale Erasmus Impact Study reported that ‘transversal skills’ were identified by 92% of employers as essential to employment and subsequent career development (European Commission 2014). Diamond et al. (2011) talk of ‘global graduates’ and identify the skills needed and how these can be developed. Many of these competencies have been shown throughout the literature to be developed through mobility, as shown in this list:

- Organisational skills
- Project management
- Decision-making
- Negotiation skills
- Creativity
- Taking on responsibility
- Problem-solving
- Risk-taking
- Networking
- Conflict resolution
- Team work and team leadership
- Communicating decisions which may be unpopular
6.3 Academic outcomes

A number of studies have talked of the potential for enhanced academic outcomes (Sutton and Rubin 2004, Jacobone & Moro 2014, Erasmus Impact Study 2014). However this is difficult to measure due to a number of factors. In the UK at least, there is a relatively high proportion of mobile students from Russell Group universities who may be higher than average achievers before mobility is taken into account. Also it is difficult to account for the higher ‘mobility capital’ mentioned above (Murphy-Lejeune 2002, Wiers-Jenssen 2011). Several observers note that outcomes of mobility may only be observable in the medium to longer term (e.g. Jacobone and Moro 2014), whereas impact studies tend to be undertaken soon after the experience. This makes it difficult to gauge any effect on degree classification and Bridger (2015) considers it to be the effect of outward mobility on ‘self-efficacy’ in the short to medium term which creates the potential for improved degree outcome.

6.4 Employment Outcomes

Whereas several studies have considered employability skills development as a result of mobility, fewer have looked at the results in terms of actual employment. The International Unit (2015) recently reported on outcomes for the 2012-13 graduating cohort of UK undergraduates. They found in comparing mobile and non-mobile students’ outcomes that, six months after graduating:

- A lower proportion of graduates who were mobile were unemployed (5.4% compared to 6.7%).
- A higher proportion of graduates who were mobile were working abroad, if in employment (11% of those in full-time work compared to 2%).
- On average, graduates who were mobile earned more across 11 out of 17 subject areas and earned more if they remained in the UK to work.
- Graduates who were mobile were earning more in 40 out of 67 subjects (with available data), with the highest disparities in salary (of at least £3,000) being in Sociology; Computer Science; Theology and Religious Studies; Electronic and Electrical Engineering, and Physical Geographical Sciences.
- A significantly lower proportion of mobile graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds were unemployed (5.0% compared to 7.6%).

(Source: International Unit 2015)

The Erasmus Impact Study (European Commission 2014) also compares employment statistics for mobile and non-mobile students. It finds that young people who study or work abroad are half as likely to face long-term unemployment that non-mobile peers and that five years after graduation, the unemployment rate of Erasmus students is 23% lower than for those who did not take part. The study found that 64% of employers view international experience as important for recruitment, up from 37% in 2006.

Generally speaking, the study found that studying abroad helps widen individual career opportunities by enlarging networks, improving knowledge of foreign languages and boosting self-confidence, as well as developing entrepreneurship. It reports that mobility supports career progression also, as the study indicates that 20% more Erasmus alumni hold management positions ten years after graduating than non-mobile graduates (European Commission 2014).
A number of reports in the published literature make policy suggestions with the aim of increasing the proportion of students that undertake outward mobility. Sweeney (2012) maintains that “establishing an institution-wide mobility culture requires the commitment of resources and clear prioritisation at institutional, faculty and departmental levels” (2012: p31). King et al. (2010) also identified a range of good practices that HE institutions can implement which could foster greater outward mobility:

- Promotion of mobility options at admissions Open Days;
- Greater provision of clear and accurate information;
- Greater staff mobility;
- Highlighting financial benefits and support available;
- Publicising good employment outcomes from alumni and employers’ testimonials;
- Ensuring clarity of credit transfer systems;
- Using returning students as mobility ambassadors with prospective mobile students by involving them in promotional events, particularly for work placements.

The International Unit’s Go International website includes a range of case studies on institutional good practice which include examples from the universities of Nottingham, Cardiff, Glasgow Caledonian, St George’s London, Edinburgh, Exeter, Reading, Sheffield, Birmingham, Glasgow. Malicki et al. (2012) offer a good practice guide from an Australian perspective.

The key document in relation to our current study is possibly the UK Strategy for Outward Mobility (International Unit 2013) so it is worth listing their strategic objectives (2013: p6-8).

1. Promote the Benefits of Study and Work Abroad
2. Monitor Trends in Student Mobility
3. Build Capacity in UK Higher Education to Facilitate Outward Mobility
4. Address Financial and Institutional Barriers to Outward Mobility
5. Create a Flexible Definition of Outward Mobility
6. Share Best Practice in UK Higher Education
7. Provide a Collective Voice for UK Higher Education
7.1 Policy implications

According to the British Council, 44% of UK students said having the option to select a course containing a period of mandatory overseas study could lead them to actively pursuing an international study opportunity (British Council 2014). This suggests that an increase in mobility take-up might be expected if more programmes integrated mobility into their core curriculum.

The list of policy implications recommended by HEFCE in its 2004 study seem still to be relevant:

- A need for more complete and regularly collected data on student mobility;
- There is an under-provision of work and mixed study/work schemes, and these are needed to respond to current student demand;
- HEIs could be more proactive in promoting student mobility, balancing it against the priority to recruit high-fee overseas students;
- Information and publicity about HE mobility schemes could be expanded, and targeted at schools and further education colleges;
- Consideration needs to be given to language learning at all levels in the UK education system;
- Consideration needs to be given to how access to mobility can be broadened; at present many students are ‘socially excluded’ from mobility opportunities because of their financial situation, family and class background, and linguistic limitations.

(HEFCE 2004, Executive summary)

Sweeney’s (2012) report was written very much from the perspective of the educational benefits of study abroad and the document is written from the belief that our universities must renew their commitment to the ethos and principles that have sustained the European university for several hundred years:

“A strategic approach to internationalisation that embraces internationalism, and is founded on an appreciation of the educational and personal benefits to be gained from mobility, is a fundamental part of that conviction.”

(Sweeney 2012: p37).
He ends with a list of recommendations for universities which, to some, might appear idealistic but which are certainly within this educational spirit. They also go beyond questions of mobility and into wider issues of curriculum internationalisation in general, but they are worth reproducing here to emphasise these key messages:

- Prioritise a strategic transformation of internationalisation away from economic and financial imperatives towards educational values and objectives;
- Develop internationalisation strategies that place the student experience, and teaching and learning, at the centre;
- Promote internationalism as a key component of internationalisation strategy;
- Develop European strategies as a sub-set of an internationalisation strategy;
- Promote mobility through the Erasmus Programme/Erasmus for All;
- Promote the European dimension in all areas of the curriculum;
- Promote internationalisation at home and abroad;
- Ensure culturally and ethnically mixed campus accommodation and avoid concentrations of single national groups;
- Promote student mobility for all disciplines and not simply those that traditionally supply the majority of mobile students;
- Develop international work placement opportunities, and promote available work placements through Erasmus;
- Develop partnerships with volunteering organisations and facilitate student participation in voluntary activities;
- Encourage a greater level of engagement with international partnerships designed to promote mobility, and develop co-operation in scholarship and research;
- Promote staff mobility, especially for short-term exploratory visits and setting up arrangements to support student mobility, including virtual mobility;
- Provide increased virtual mobility opportunities within course design, fostering links with overseas partners;
- Develop joint degrees through international partnerships;
- Promote Masters-level and doctoral studies through the Erasmus Mundus programme;
- Explore opportunities for joint doctoral supervision and dual awards;
- Enhance opportunities throughout the university for foreign language learning, including non-European languages, in dedicated ‘Languages for All’ facilities;
- Provide opportunities for language learning to be credit bearing and to contribute to final awards;
- Facilitate credit transfer and accumulation where appropriate with partner institutions;
- Introduce additional qualifications and awards with foreign language components, as well as opportunities to give formal recognition to volunteering;
- Ensure that study abroad or work placements are adequately represented in the Diploma Supplement and that such is recognised by the award of credits;
- Encourage staff and student participation in international partnerships leading to joint conferences, symposia and colloquia, including shared teaching of modules and common assessment, and encourage a diverse and multidisciplinary approach to such initiatives;
- Encourage greater levels of international co-operation in research and scholarship;
- Promote awareness of the European Higher Education Area;
- Fully apply the tools, principles and practices of the Bologna Process, including Diploma Supplement, ECTS, and transparent and appropriate application of qualification frameworks, including correct adherence to the principle of the three-cycle framework, and adherence to effective quality assurance processes.

(Sweeney 2012: p38)
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