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# LEADERSHIP FEATURES INFLUENCING TRANSFORMATION IN THE POST-MERGER AND POST-INCORPORATION ERA: A CASE OF THE DURBAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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## Abstract

This study examines features possessed by leaders at Durban University of Technology (DUT) and their influence on transformation in the South African post-merger and post-incorporation era. University leaders in this institution do not apply effective leadership styles, though their influence on transformation is imminent. This study employed qualitative semi-structured interviews carried out with 28 university leaders in middle and senior management positions at DUT. The study revealed that the university leaders understood the concept of leadership as referring to changes taking place in the university rather than the 'soft skills' possessed by managers. To influence transformation, this study recommends that the university should initiate an in-house management or leadership development programme with more emphasis on different leadership styles applicable for use in universities.

**Key Words:** Interpretivist Perspective, New Public Management, Leadership Styles, University Of Technology

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## Introduction

A plethora of development scholars have attempted to shed light on the influence of leadership on change and transformation in South African higher education institutions (HEIs). This host of researchers has emphasised that leadership fosters change and transformation (Herbst & Conradie 2011, 2) and allows the institution to cope with the challenges of inevitable change (Fullan & Scott 2009, 110). There are a multiplicity of challenges and hindrances in transforming HEIs in South Africa which include leaders' indecisiveness and being afraid to make difficult decisions (Mabelebele 2013; Makgoba & Chetty 2010, 168; Van Niekerk 2005). Naidoo and Van Der Walt (2005, 1) indicate that there is an urgent need for transformation in South Africa, which requires strong leadership to drive the process. This study is guided by the perspectives advanced above, although it seeks to close a gap by establishing leadership's influence on transformation in the South African post-merger and post-incorporation era in a university of technology (UoT).

Leaders in HEIs are perceived to be responsible for influencing transformation as they are central to initiating, implementing, monitoring and evaluating change and transformative initiatives and programmes. This is attributed to the fact that leaders

are employed to develop, manage, implement and review transformation initiatives or programmes such as institutional policies and strategic plans.

Kinjanjui (2007), for example, indicates that visionary and creative leadership is necessary for transformation of higher education in Kenya and notes that the restructuring of leadership, governance and management systems of each institution should be a priority. In line with this, Randall and Coakley (2006, 325) argue that in today's changing academic environment, leaders in HEIs are confronted with increasing demands to transform these institutions, as stakeholders' expectations have risen and resources have diminished. These increasing responsibilities are noted by Joubert and Martins (2013, 118) who indicate that the transformation agenda in UNISA covers the entire spectrum of the strategic planning process, including the vision, mission, values and institutional operations.

The objectives of this study are to establish how leadership is developed and to identify the features that have the potential to influence transformation post-merger and post-incorporation at DUT.

## Conceptual framework

The term "leadership" has many definitions but for the purpose of this study the term encompasses and

refers to university managers' ability to lead, drive and influence transformation. Olasupo (2011, 163) contends that leadership is a process for social influence whereby a leader seeks the voluntary participation of subordinates in an effort to reach the institutional goals. Kouzes and Posner (2002) view leadership as a process used to bring forth the best from employers and employees. Meanwhile, Kotter (1996) considers leadership as a means to inspire people to realise institutional vision. Lussier (1997) advances it as influencing employees to achieve organisational objectives. Scott, Coates and Anderson (2008, 3), however, see leadership as having more of a focus on setting and motivating new directions.

This study recognizes the rich interpretations and understandings of the term 'leadership' and invokes, as relevant, the vast discourse as understood by numerous authorities. On the account of this premise, it intends to establish leadership attributes that influence transformation in the post-merger and post-incorporation era at DUT. As the relationship between leadership attributes and transformation is scantily discussed, this study, in recognition of this deficit, attempts to link the influence of leadership to transformation.

The term 'transformation' can assume multiple meanings and definitions dependent on the context from which it emerges (Seedat, Khoza-Shangase & Sullivan 2014, 69). Researchers in South Africa have defined transformation in terms of race (Francis & Hemson, 2010); efficiency (Ntshoe 2004; Seedat *et al.* 2014, 70); change (Meyer & Botha 2004; Ngara 2003) and change of organizational strategy and structure, systems and processes, measurements and controls, culture and expectations, costs and capabilities (Oloyede 2007). Ncayiyane and Hayward (2007, 23) indicate that transformation includes institutional funding, student financing, curricular reform, student access and success, academic research, the institutional culture, as well as equity and gender issues. Transformation is one word that captures the social, economic and political imperatives and aspirations that followed the collapse of apartheid and the onset of democracy in South Africa (Wangenge-Ouma 2010). For the purpose of this study, transformation is not seen as a total metamorphosis, however, it is seen as being linked to leadership attributes that have a direct influence on it.

## **Literature review**

The dramatic shift in HEIs away from traditional governance approaches based on academic freedom, collegiality and trust have led to less emphasis on leadership approaches that are informed by the New Public Management (NPM) principles of the private sector. De Boer, Enders and Leisyte (2007, 30) assert that NPM approaches stimulate further means to strengthen institutional leadership and managerial technologies in the higher education sector. Randall

and Coakley (2006) propose Heifetz's 'adaptive leadership model' as the primary process for initiating change in today's more business-oriented academic environment in which colleges and universities are required to compete to attract students and are facing greater scrutiny from outside constituencies, resulting in higher levels of accountability. They argue that leadership is a process in which change initiatives must emanate from key stakeholders, all of whom are engaged in this process. Meanwhile, Heifetz, Kania and Kramer (2004) suggest that adaptive leadership is based on the premise that leadership is more of a process rather than being based on individual personal capabilities. Heifetz *et al.* (2004) assert that this type of leadership should compel all stakeholders involved to work towards a solution through debate and creative thinking, identifying the rewards, opportunities, and challenges they will face. While this study is informed by previous perspectives, it expands on these views by interrogating leadership features that have the potential to influence transformation, post-merger and post-incorporation.

'Transactional leadership', which is based on motivating people to perform in exchange for specific rewards, has been shown to enable the university to manage the conflicting demands of maintaining a balanced budget while continuing to support the needs of the faculty (Pounder, 2001). Originally defined by Bass (1985) and Bass and Avolio (1994), transformational leadership is the ability to motivate employees to excel beyond what is expected through the use of individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, and charisma. Simons (1999) has emphasized the importance of "integrity" for producing the leader-follower trust that is central to transformational leadership. Paster and Mayo (2008) mention four transformational leadership dimensions which include idealized influence or charisma (diffuse influence over followers' beliefs, attitudes and behaviors); inspiration (motivate and inspire); individualized consideration (satisfaction and well-being) and intellectual stimulation (approach old situations in new ways). This study is guided by different perspectives advanced by the researchers above on leadership styles mostly applied in HEIs. However, this study extends their arguments by interrogating whether leadership qualities possessed by manager do indeed influence transformation post-merger and post-incorporation at a South African UoT.

Successful HEIs are perceived to be led by effective leaders who listen to all stakeholders. A number of researchers (Fullan & Scott 2009; Paster & Mayo 2008; Spendlove 2007) mention that the most common attributes cited for effective university leadership were openness; honesty; the need to consult others; the ability to listen, negotiate and persuade; the ability to think broadly/strategically; and to engage with people. There are a plethora of researchers who have cited capacity and talent,

working productively, calmly and being able to make difficult decisions (Fullan & Scott 2009; Mabelebe 2013) as some major capabilities required in the role of leading HEIs. Meanwhile, Zide (2010) asserts that a true African leader is one who takes the time to listen to and consider what people have to say. While this study is aligned with the above mentioned arguments, it advances them by investigating whether university leaders do influence transformation by being prepared to listen decisively to both internal and external stakeholders.

There appears to be a culture of fear which has been cultivated by different key internal and external stakeholders interfering with daily operations of the university to ensure that decisions which are made respond to their desired personal needs. This has compelled leaders to promote the culture of silence which has resulted in limited autonomy, freedom of speech and academic freedom. Section 16 (1) of the South African Constitution (RSA, 1996) provides that each citizen has the right to freedom of expression which embraces academic freedom and freedom of scientific research. Further, the Education White Paper 3: The Programme for Transformation of Higher Education (RSA, 1997) mentions the principle of academic freedom, implying the absence of outside interference, censure or obstacles in the pursuit and practice of academic work. Kulati and Moja (2007) argue that the ethos of professional autonomy and academic freedom has given rise to a collegial culture that promotes selected participation in decision-making. Olayo (2005) also found a low level of staff participation in decision-making and concluded that this reduced their work performance. At the same time, gender imbalance in higher education is acute in virtually all African countries (Teferra & Altbach 2004; Notshulwana 2011). This is further investigated in this study where the question of whether decision-making by university leaders is centralized or decentralized in DUT, post-merger and post-incorporation. This study is informed by the legislative frameworks stated above although it investigates whether leaders in this university do conform to the above provision in influencing transformation in this university.

### **Research methodology**

In-depth interviews targeting university leaders in middle and senior management positions were also conducted. This mixed method was used to enable triangulation to take place (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2007). This study embraced the interpretivist perspective (Saunders *et al.*, 2007) as the researcher investigated the perceptions of university leaders' influence on transformation, post-merger and post-incorporation at a HEI. This perspective is suitable for this study as it investigates leaders' perceptions relating to management research,

particularly in the field of organisational development (Saunders *et al.*, 2007).

### **Qualitative semi-structured interviews**

The qualitative aspect of this study used non-probability purposive sampling (Babie *et al.*, 2004), where 28 university leaders in middle and senior management positions were surveyed. Interviews were used in this study to obtain information on the respondents' understanding and the features influencing transformation in the post-merger and post-incorporation era. This study is located within the discipline of leadership and transformation in HEIs and as per Anderson, Sweeney and William's (2007) assertion, in business and management research projects the researcher's research question(s), objectives and choice of research strategy may dictate non-probability sampling. In-depth interviews were conducted with 28 academic and non-academic leaders from Peromnes Grades 1 to 5 as well as key stakeholders, including representatives of trade unions and of the Student Representative Council (SRC). These include the Vice Chancellor and Principal, three Deputy Chancellors: Academic, Research and Administration, six Faculty Deans, four Executive Management members, the Registrar and the Director: Human Resources and Finance, respectively. Furthermore, six academic Heads of Departments, one Research Director and one Director for Quality Directorate and Marketing and Communication were interviewed. In-depth interviews were also conducted with presidents (two) and secretaries of the trade unions and SRC (two) respectively.

### **Data collection**

The 'phenomenological interview' (Kvale 1996) was used as the data collection method. The data were collected over a three month period from May to July 2013. Of the total of 191 questionnaires disseminated, 133 were completed and returned, representing a 70 percent response rate. To maintain confidentiality, the questionnaires were personally distributed and collected by the researcher. The Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha values for individual dimensions were high and a reliability coefficient of 0.947 was recorded.

### **Data analysis**

The quantitative data collected from the respondents was analysed using NVivo software (version 10) which was assisted in organizing, analysing and sharing data. The themes gleaned from the in-depth interviews were categorized into nodes or themes. Aligned to the method suggested by Cresswell (2003), analysis of the qualitative data was conducted through transcribing each interview, after which

NVivo was used to determine the underlying themes for each question.

### **Reliability of the interview data**

Several strategies that ensured reliability of data were employed. Babbie and Mouton's (2001) method was applied to achieve credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. Thus, reliability was achieved by triangulation and debriefing. A triangulation method is typically a strategy (test) for improving reliability of research or evaluation of findings (Golafshami 2003). Qualitative research findings in this study were triangulated by the structured interviews carried out with the research participants that were between junior and middle leadership levels.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Permission was requested from and granted by the DUT Ethics Committee to conduct the study, and consent was also formally obtained from the participants. At the same time, the confidentiality and anonymity of participants was maintained and guaranteed. A pilot study was undertaken prior to conducting a full-scale study.

### **Research findings**

#### **Understanding of leadership within the university**

The research participants revealed three ways in which leadership was understood in DUT which include changes within the university, performance and 'soft skills'. Changes within the university (theme) had the highest number of respondents with their understanding of leadership being moving or shifting things to new places, giving directions to subordinates with an outcome, being consultative, alignment with the university objectives, communicating the strategy and inspiring employees to follow a particular vision. As one of the interviewees explained:

*"Leadership refers to shifting something to new places. It is to try to be consultative and to include everybody. It should be about ensuring that the vision and mission is fulfilled by those in charge of the university."*

The leadership was understood by the research participants through soft skills. Interviewees emphasised the understanding of leadership as leaders being able to motivate individual employees and teams, take bold steps, promote stability and deal with disagreements, thus leading the university.

Furthermore, the emphasis was placed on the leader who is transient in the current situation, visionary, consultative and inclusive, a listener, providing guidance and thinking 'outside the box'.

The participants pointed out that respect and unifying leaders are examples of how leadership is understood in this university. An illustration of this thinking was advanced by an interviewee:

*"Having people within strategic positions that can motivate others to perform well in their portfolios is important. Groups of people in universities have a group of portfolios and in those portfolios they should lead to motivate people and teams. Leadership should have an inclusive style."*

Very few respondents understood leadership as based on performance of the university (driving the progress, increase in research output and actionable strategic plan). These notions are revealed by the university leader in the following comment:

*"Leadership in this university means delivery of its mandate of research output and ensuring the strategy is actionable."*

When interviewing leaders about their understanding of leadership in this university, another theme emerged regarding the leadership challenges facing this university. The research participants mentioned organizational challenges that were elicited from the participants when deliberating on their understanding of leadership within the university. These included frequent changes of top leaders in the university and failure to retain Vice Chancellors (VCs). This view was concurred with by a research participant:

*"Every two years we had changed most top leaders in the university. If you could have a good leadership, this is the way to transform and many organisations are struggling with change management and to change to what they are doing and what they've been doing"*

Other difficulties mentioned by the research participants included the indecisiveness of leadership and the escalation of the managerial responsibilities to the human resources department. This is corroborated by one of the interviewees:

*"Leaders don't want to take decisions and are referred to other forums e.g. staffing challenges are referred to the HR department which causes HR to be inundated with complaints."*

The research participants claimed that supporting departments such as Finance, Human Resources and Maintenance were highly ineffective. The claim included that the centralist type of executive management was weak in terms of devolution of power and delegation of authority which has led to weakened structures, mainly caused by the fact that power is vested in one person, VC. This assertion was supported by a university leader:

*"In this university there is no devolution of power and delegation of authority has become very weak as line managers cannot take decisions and too much power is vested in one person."*

The interviewees indicated that the aforesaid has led to lowered morale, weakened structures and systems, employees feeling unappreciated, and non-

leaders or managers or groups of individuals (cabal) interfering with leaders of the institutions. As one individual reported:

*"A previous VC uttered the very same words and launched the commission of inquiry and instead of giving us the results of the inquiry he resigned. It seems as if there is a group of individuals who interfere with the leadership of the university. Leadership in DUT is complicated in some ways because based on experience, from when I joined DUT, it seems like there are people who are running the university who are not at council or executive management level. The previous VC made an official announcement at a Senate meeting that there is a cabal that want to oust him and after three months he resigned and no one knew why he resigned. We have office bearers who are employed to lead and are good leaders and there are groups of people who are not office bearers who have a bad influence and spread information. The office bearers are transient - they come for five years and go and those who are influential are here for much longer, this disharmony leads in crisis management."*

It was quite evident from the respondents that everybody sees reporting to the VC as unsustainable with no prospects for the future, a sentiment which was shared with regard to the male dominance seen in leadership positions. This was echoed by the interviewee:

*"University leaders are always alleging that they are inclusive without including women in leadership decisions."*

### **Leadership features influencing transformation within the university**

The leadership features that had an effect on transformation were categorized into four themes or nodes which include core values and principles; administration; academia; and bottom-up strategies. The highest total coverage was the core values and principles which included building trust by the VC through consultation with employees on university direction, as well as honesty, freedom of expression without fear, transparency and inclusiveness, integrity, working hard, caring for people and 'having feet on the ground'. Moreover, the research participants cited passion, political will, character, fairness, delegating, compassion, an 'open-door' policy and compliance as the main features that have influenced transformation in this university. This is exemplified by the following remarks by an interviewee:

*"He [the VC] allows transparency and people to speak or talk, inclusivity (there are workshops and all stakeholders talk), integrity, honesty and cares for the people. The VC has sufficient passion and sufficient political will."*

The bottom-up leadership approach was seen by the respondents as features that have influenced

transformation. The participants highlighted excessive consultations at all levels, involvement in decision-making, participation which includes all stakeholders, being responsive to the needs of staff, open to suggestions and providing feedback on council resolutions. This was concurred with by a research participant:

*"At DUT there have been lots of consultations and people feel in the average they are taking part and we are involved in decision-making. What we need to see is implementation, monitoring and evaluation - which mean you look at the impact of what someone is doing to in terms of broader communities."*

The administrative features included the reduced student strikes, redressing employment inequity and the VC's attention given to the departments under suspicion (Maintenance, Procurement and Student Accommodation) which were allegedly behind the past unrests in the university. An illustration of this thinking is articulated by the interviewee:

*"It is like there is a group of individuals who interferes with the leaders of the institution and it is better this time as a lot of strikes have reduced and leadership responds to the needs of staff and students."*

### **Major findings**

The sampled university leaders acknowledged that changes taking place within the university refer to leadership in the 'real' sense more than participants who had viewed leadership as the soft skills possessed by leaders. This was followed by the respondents who had understood leadership as leaders who could motivate staff, be decisive, transient, visionary, consultative and inclusive, listen, be respectful, think 'outside the box' and act as unifiers. Very few referred to leadership as being linked to the performance of the university by citing increasing research outputs and actionable strategy. Another major highlight of this study was the challenges advanced by the research participants on their understanding of leadership. The leadership challenges advanced by the research participants included the exodus of the VCs and failure to retain them, indecisiveness, a centralist type of management style, dampened morale, cabal presence, and gender imbalances in leadership of the university.

On the topic of the leadership features influencing transformation in this university, the respondents implied that the core values and principles shared by the VC influence transformation in this university. These values include being honest, consultative, transparent, promoting freedom of speech, having integrity, political will, being inclusive and caring for people. Another major highlight mentioned by the respondents was the bottom-up strategies applied by the university leaders which include excessive consultation involvement in

decision-making and responsiveness to staff needs. Administrative features that influenced transformation included reduced student strikes and academic reform (with curriculum change being key).

### **Discussion of the research findings**

The primary objectives of this study are to establish an understanding of leadership and their features that have the potential to influence transformation in the post-merger and post-incorporation era in DUT. The understanding of leadership by the research participants in this university is partly consistent with three leadership styles mostly applicable for use in HEIs. The research participants claimed that leadership changes taking place in this university are partly linked to adaptive leadership style features (Heifetz *et al.*, 2004). However, this style suggests that change processes should emanate from the key stakeholders a process which was not highlighted by the respondents in this study.

Leaders in this university were viewed as being responsible for motivating staff which partly follows a transactional leadership style (Pounder 2001). However, this finding is in contrast with this style as the respondents never mentioned the forms of motivations which might include specific rewards in exchange for the agreed performance, as in the case of this style. Furthermore, leadership were understood by the research participants as partly resembling the transformational leadership style (Bass 1985; Bass & Avolio 1994) as leaders were understood as motivating employees. Though there were some leadership styles' features possessed by the DUT leaders which were consistent with the abovementioned styles, major features of these styles were not mentioned by the research participants.

The research participants' understanding of leadership as change taking place in this university is in agreement with numerous researchers. These include Herbst and Conradie (2011) who claimed that leadership fosters change and being able to cope with challenges of inevitable change. The understanding of leadership changes taking place has been confirmed by Kennedy (2001) who mentioned that leadership goes from the known to the unknown, bridging the divide. There were also respondents who highlighted that the VC is decisive, which is in accord with Fullan and Scott (2009); Mabelebele (2013); Makgoba and Chetty's (2010) assertion that leadership decisiveness in HEIs is the recipe for change. This latter finding is contradicted by the respondents who equally felt that leaders in this university were indecisive with a centralistic leadership style, which is contrary to the findings of the previous researchers. The centralist decision-making supports Olayo (2005) and Shattock's (2013) finding that low levels of staff participation in decision-making are rampant in HEIs. The perceived poor listening abilities and alleged dishonesty of the university leaders is in line with the

findings of a plethora of researchers (Fullan & Scott 2008; Paster & Mayo 2008; Spendlove 2007; Zide 2010). The high number of respondents who were dissatisfied with gender imbalances in senior positions (with males dominating) underscores Notshulwana's (2011) and Teferra and Altbach's (2004) position that gender imbalances in all African countries are acute. The 'buzzwords' that were common to almost all the research participants included the 'actionable strategic plan' which is congruent with Joubert and Martins (2013). While the findings of the above studies are variably consistent and inconsistent with the study research findings, those which are consistent are not clearly linked as their arguments are generally based on HEIs with no central focus on the merged and incorporated institutions in South Africa.

### **Conclusions**

This article observed a causal relationship between the respondents' understanding of leadership and leadership features influencing transformation in this university. These features include being consultative, inclusive, listening, transparency, freedom of speech, respect and integrity. The article further observed that leaders in this university have not adopted any identifiable leadership style in its entirety. These leaders have only applied certain features espoused by these styles such as in adaptive (changes), transactional and transformational leadership style (motivating). This suggests that these leaders have overlooked some major features of these styles which directly influence transformation in HEIs. This article concludes that the leadership of the university is limited in applying some of the styles due to the fact that a performance management system is not in place. The implementation of such a system could assist the university leaders to apply the transactional leadership style by motivating employees through both pecuniary and non-pecuniary rewards. Achieving the transformation agenda through the development of the actionable strategic plans at institutional, faculty and departmental level has been observed in this article as an effective means of progressing.

There were contrary feelings regarding the decisiveness of leaders, which suggest that leaders in this university are seen as decisive to a limited extent. This article further observed that the university leaders centralised decision-making with very selective leaders who were involved. This is consistent with the challenges advanced by the research participants that there was a cabal influencing decisions in this university although the members were not occupying managerial positions. This suggests that DUT is still led by one dominant racial group which drives their racial agenda as there were claims that members of this race group occupy strategic positions. Finally, the article concludes that

twenty years into democracy, the DUT is still racially- and gender-skewed. It has been proven that leadership positions were occupied by Indians and women were not represented in leadership positions. Although redressing past injustices is vital, racial domination cannot be central in solving HEIs challenges as these are regarded as global. Through the outcry regarding the dominance of Indians in strategic leadership positions by most of the respondents, it could be construed that Indians are good leaders as this institutions (where there they are in leadership) has not been under government administration appointed by the Ministry of Education due to maladministration. This has been prevalent in institutions which are predominantly governed by South African blacks.

The limitation of the study was the scarcity of published studies on the relationship between leadership and transformation in HEIs. Failure to interview senior leaders who occupy critical positions (including managers in the Finance and Maintenance departments) which are alleged to be untransformed in this university proved to be a limitation to the study findings. This study should be replicated in other merged universities in South Africa as a means of developing remedial comprehensive plans where commonalities exist. Future researchers should extend and add greater depth to this study which investigates leaders and determines the views of all stakeholders within HEIs. A longitudinal study should be conducted by future researchers by using qualitative approaches, including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The following recommendations are advanced:

- The university leaders should be trained in different leadership styles applicable to HEIs. These leaders should be capacitated on which styles these are and how, where and when to apply them. This suggests that leaders cannot adopt only one particular style as universities are change averse and complex environments which require leaders to apply different styles in response to particular situations.
- The university leaders should embark on management or leadership development programmes where they would be capacitated on the value of different decision-making systems in HEIs. This will assist the university leaders to know how and when to centralise, decentralise or both.
- To ensure that there is equity in race and gender, the university leaders should develop a capacity building plan to prepare all racial groups, particularly women, to ascend to leadership positions in different levels.
- The university leaders should exercise their political will to address one dominant racial group occupying strategic positions by diversifying the staff complement. This would be addressed by the university through

implementing a diversity management strategy and employment equity policy.

- The university leaders should develop a performance management system where performance of all employees will be managed and measured as most of the leadership styles lie in rewarding employees. This will increase accountability of all staff members and the university will be known as one which is performance driven.
- The university should develop an actionable strategic plan that will be owned and implemented by all leaders in the university. This strategy will be used to drive the transformation agenda of the institutions as one of the strategy goals.

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