

A pathway into a degree program: Forging better links

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While the transition experiences of international students have been widely studied, there has been limited analysis of the learning contexts they encounter in Australian higher education, particularly in postgraduate coursework degrees. As a result, little is known about how well prepared students are as they graduate from Pathway programs which prepare them for academic study by providing language and literacy instruction. Because academic language and learning activities in universities often take place outside students' disciplinary learning experience, like academic language and learning (ALL) professionals, Pathway teachers face similar challenges in ensuring that student learning is relevant to future study destinations. Both have an ongoing task of attempting to forge closer links with the disciplines. This paper reports on the first phase of a study into the transition experiences of postgraduate coursework international students. Curriculum documents at both a Pathway program and the destination disciplinary program in a Business school are examined to determine how well the Pathway program feeds into the degree program. Using Critical Discourse Analysis to locate how each program represents its student audience, the study found authoritarian approaches in the Pathway program, presenting academic study as requiring the application of generic skills. In the disciplinary context, the more complex and ambiguous aspects of academic study are emphasised. Assumptions about the transferability of generic academic skills are questioned in the light of such differences between learning contexts. Approaches which engage students more fully with content relevant to their future studies could produce more relevant pathways to higher education for international students.

Key Words: Pathway programs; international students; academic literacies; foundation courses; English for Academic Purposes; university preparation programs.

1. Introduction

Pathway institutions offering preparatory programs have developed as part of Australian internationalised higher education. They conduct programs which aim to prepare students from overseas for university study in Australia. However, they are primarily commercially focused, being part of the global education industry which constructs English language as "a global commodity to be bought and sold on the world market" (Pennycook, 1997, p. 258). Fee paying students who, because they are perceived to lack certain linguistic or academic skills, are deemed underprepared for higher education, must complete short courses of 5 or 10 weeks duration before entering university. This commercial focus may, in various ways, influence the educational aims of Pathway institutions, one outcome being the assumption that students are well prepared for the academic experience.

However, in a commercial environment, pragmatic considerations can take priority over educational aims and result in practices and curricula that favour institutional priorities over quality teaching and learning. The necessity for short-term preparatory courses, for instance, involves time constraints which do not necessarily take into consideration students' very different rates of learning. Pathway programs are also caught between needing both to teach academic conventions and to be inclusive of the needs of culturally diverse student groups. This can result in a curriculum that is "prescriptive and formulaic" (Yazbeck, 2008, p. 39), having a focus on generic skills which may not provide a detailed introduction to academic learning.

The function of Pathway programs as providers of language and cultural preparation for students entering higher education is firmly established, yet they have received scant attention in the literature. There has been limited examination of how curriculum content is presented, and how successful Pathway programs are in preparing their students for studies at university.

This paper, through analysis of short texts extracted from relevant curriculum documents, examines the notion of transferability of academic skills across the divide between Pathway and Degree programs. By examining how a Pathway program feeds into a Degree program in a Business school, the paper aims to discover ways in which students are represented in the documents. The analysis reveals that each document positions the student audience differently and this has implications for curricula in both Pathway and Degree programs.

2. Learning in Pathway contexts

The higher education literature on the experiences of international students has tended to focus on the problems that students have in adjusting to the Australian educational context. Awareness of how this research had stereotyped and judged students on the basis of their educational or cultural backgrounds has led to more nuanced understandings. Claims that students from Asian countries, for instance, come with culturally bounded approaches to learning, and that they are not successful at adapting to the new educational context, have since been refuted (Volet & Renshaw, 1996, p. 217). Instead, international students, like their local counterparts, have been found to be influenced more by the demands of the academic context than by cultural factors (Volet & Renshaw, 1996, p. 211). Rather than being categorised as deficient, they are able to meet the demands of being required to think and write in new ways and strategically adapt to the conditions in which they are studying (Benzie, 2008; Biggs, 1996; Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Kettle, 2005). In the higher education field of accounting, for instance, where large numbers of international students have been recruited, research more recently emphasises the problems international students present for the institution (Birrell, 2006; Burch, 2008; Watty, 2007). This strand of research has argued that students' language deficiencies, different study methods, and cultural backgrounds have a detrimental effect on higher education for all students (McGowan & Potter, 2008). Instead of assuming deficit students, other studies promote the integration of academic learning into degree programs (see for example Evans, Tindale, Cable, & Hamil Mead, 2009). There remains, however, little examination of educational contexts such as disciplinary curricula. Instead the focus remains on the individual student, expected to conform to the unquestioned practices of higher education in Australia.

The notion of pathways to higher education relies on the assumption that learning a generic set of academic skills will adequately prepare students for all disciplinary studies. However, Lea and Street's (1998) work in academic writing found academic learning involves much more than the application of skills. Academic disciplines are recognised as sites of discourse and power where knowledge is contested and literacy practices vary across genres, fields and disciplines. In order to satisfy the requirements at each disciplinary setting, students must engage in a diverse range of linguistic practices. This implies that preparing students for academia involves engaging them directly with the "confrontation between the cultural, educational and linguistic practices ... of the academy" (Pennycook, 1997, p. 266). The picture this paints of the contested and variable nature of academic learning suggests that an emphasis on generic skills will not fully prepare students for academic study.

Some studies in Pathway contexts have refuted notions of the deficit learner implied in a skills approach (Doherty & Singh, 2007), and others have examined the different linguistic requirements of Pathway and disciplinary contexts. For instance, Miller (2011), using a corpus-based approach to compare textbook language, found that the “sentence internal language” contained in ESL textbooks is not representative of language in university textbooks, and concluded that this can cause difficulties for students transitioning between the two contexts. Murray’s (2010) assertion that commencing university students might need to unlearn some of what they have been taught in the Pathway context suggests an acceptance that Pathway programs cannot prepare for every aspect of a student’s disciplinary studies, and undermines the notion of efficient preparation for university suggested by the commercial context. Closer examination is required of the nexus between Pathway and disciplinary programs, in a way that accounts for both student diversity and disciplines as sites of discourse and power. Without this analysis of the wider issues which affect students’ transitions to disciplinary learning, preparatory programs risk becoming irrelevant.

3. A critical discourse analytic approach to curriculum documents

This paper analyses data from a larger study into the transition experiences of international students. The first stage of the study examined a selection of the curriculum documents encountered by students transitioning to a postgraduate coursework degree via a preparatory Pathway program. This paper draws on data from texts selected from introductory information in these documents at two locations – the Pathway program at a Pathway college, and an accounting program in the University. The documents are the *Pathway Coursebook*: the main teaching text for the Pathway program, and the *Course Outline* for the Accounting program. The texts analysed below are: *Text 1 – Pathway Coursebook* and *Text 2 - Degree Program Course Outline*.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an approach often used in investigations of the workings of power and ideology in education (Fairclough, 2003; Rogers, 2004). It is seen as particularly useful for educational research because of its combination of linguistic analysis with an analysis of the wider social context used to reveal the discursive construction of power relations in the text (Morgan & Taylor, 2005, p. 2). Fundamental to the approach is the assumption that the effects of power are accessible through an analysis of language in the text, which is always framed by its contexts. As Fairclough (2003) states, “we can attribute causal effects to linguistic forms but only through a careful account of meaning and context” (p. 13). The analysis thus relies on an oscillation between text and contexts (Henderson, 2005). The contexts in this study include both the specific teaching programs in which the texts were produced, and the surrounding sociocultural conditions of their practice: the complex world of internationalised higher education.

4. Pathway and Degree program texts: sites of power

This analysis draws on two short texts selected from the documents used by students as they study in the Pathway program and later in the Degree program at an Australian university. It is interested in how each text constructs the academic world for students, and how each positions the student in that world.

4.1. Text 1: Pathway program

Text 1 comprises the following two paragraphs selected from a longer section of 18 numbered paragraphs in the introductory unit of the Pathway Coursebook.

1.12 Independence

At university there is little supervision and checking to see that students have completed the work they are required to do. The same is true in [Pathway program]. You are required to take responsibility for your own learning and to organize a study plan throughout the course. For example, if many

grammar mistakes appear in an essay, it is advised that you allow time for use of the specific resources available in the [library] that target those needs.

1.13 Academic language

As part of your preparation for university study, you are instructed in using academic language for all written and oral assignments. Academic language includes following gender inclusive language conventions, avoiding slang and colloquial language, minimal use of personal pronouns, hedging/vague language, and use of an appropriate academic tone.

4.1.1. The power of pronouns and vocabulary choices

The student audience for this text is addressed using the pronoun “you” which works initially to personalise the message. Pronouns and passive constructions used together indicate how the text positions students, subjecting them to powerful institutional discourses. “At university” (line 2) refers to students’ future study destination, using the broad term “students”. The addressee then shifts to a personalised “you” who is instructed in how to approach learning in the local context, through the use of strongly directive language: “you are required to” (line 4) and “it is advised that you ...” (line 6). These passive constructions, while carrying authority, obscure the role of the teacher. There is for instance no indication that the student will be given any instruction, particularly in the areas of self-organisation and grammar. The student is thus represented as an autonomous individual who can manage the task of academic preparation almost without instruction. The voice of institutional power, present but also hidden and therefore more powerful, is unstated in phrases such as “you are required to” (line 4). Statements like these expect strong obligation on the part of the recipient, despite (or because of) the passive construction, which hides the actor. The effect would be very different if the text were to use low level modal operators such as “may” and “might”. Forms such as “you may familiarize yourself” or “you might want to be actively involved” would demand more of students, requiring them to be less passive recipients of instruction, and more involved in the learning. It would invite them to decide for themselves what part they wish to take in the learning, and urge them to consider why. This more dialogic re-wording suggests a re-focus onto context. Rather than simply following instructions, students would need to ask themselves questions such as: “Why would I want to be actively involved? What should I familiarize myself with? How do I do this?” Thinking about such questions would prepare them for the “pluralisation of knowledge”(Pennycook, 1997, p. 264) to be found in academia.

There is a shift from the personalised “you” when the individual is addressed, and a distancing when a more negative topic such as students making mistakes arises. The student actor is hidden in the notion that mistakes “appear” (line 5), and the view that if the student simply allows time to use resources, these mistakes will be corrected (line 6). This shift to the passivised student actor presents academic work as something which “happens to” students, suggesting that by simply following the directives they will be successful.

In the next section headed *Academic language* (lines 8-13), vocabulary items are introduced, but with little context. The phrase, “you are instructed” (line 9), works to position the student as a passive recipient of instruction, emphasising institutional power. The use of specific terminology suggests that choices of topic to include in the program may have more to do with teachers’ than students’ interests. Here, the use of linguistic terminology such as “hedging/vague language” and “pronouns” is an example of terms which may be familiar to teachers being used to address the student. Phrases such as “gender inclusive ... conventions” (line 11), “hedging” (line 12) and “appropriate academic tone” (line 13) are not explained and may mean little to commencing students from overseas. This is particularly because the structure of the sentence makes it unclear as to whether hedging/vague language is something to be followed or avoided. While a more complete idea of academic writing conventions may be explained in class, as each of these topics is further developed, this introduction to academic language is a partial and confusing definition of academic concepts and does little to set the scene for the teaching to follow.

This confusion over terminology reflects the imprecise meanings of these concepts in the wider academic context. Here, and throughout the remainder of the document, academic genres are presented as universal. For example, the course includes assessment tasks such as a critical review, essay, and report, suggesting that these tasks do not vary across disciplinary contexts. Meanings of concepts such as “academic style” and “tone” vary across disciplines which are not “uniform or stable but sites of competing individuals, theories and methodologies” (Hyland, 2009, p. 14). This instability of academic discourses appropriate to a discipline means that students need to learn and produce a range of academic genres even within a single disciplinary context. To prepare students for this process of “genre juggling” (Hyland, 2009, p. 129), a Pathway program such as this one, situated outside the academic context, is presented with some challenges.

4.1.2. Discourses positioning the student as passive

Nominalisation, the process of “transforming a clause into a noun-like entity” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 13), removes the actor from a text. This can lead to a more authoritarian text, as fewer words inevitably causes some meaning to remain hidden. Section 1.13, *Academic language*, makes increased use of nominalisation until almost the entire section is nominalised, starting with “preparation for university study” (line 9), and encompassing a list of features of academic language (lines 10-13). This usage contributes to the strongly directive tone of this section, perhaps indicating the heavy emphasis on writing and academic language students are expected to find at university. Indeed it has been found that there is a progressive movement into nominalisation and other abstract language through the education system, with the most abstract language found in higher education (Gerot & Wignell, 1994, p. 149). Through this process of hiding some features of academic language and exposing others, the Pathway course is presented as in itself a holder of expert knowledge – the authority on academic language. This leaves the student, however, represented as a passive recipient requiring instruction in a range of academic skills.

4.1.3. Discourse of student-centred learning

Section 1.12, *Independence*, relates to a discourse on student-centred learning and to the autonomy and self-directedness regularly associated with higher education (Northedge, 2003). The statement, “you are required to take responsibility for your own learning” (line 4), references a range of assumptions about how students must behave. The discourse of student-centred learning is pervasive in higher education, where an unfocused sink-or-swim approach has often “left students floundering” and unable to access the disciplinary discourses (Northedge, 2003, p. 31).

Text 1 conceptualises academic literacy as being involved with “autonomous, decontextualised skills located in the individual” (Ivanic, 2004, p. 221). The social, contextual, and contested nature of learning is not taken into account and there is little acknowledgement of students’ need “for supported participation in the relevant knowledge community” (Northedge, 2003, p. 31). This analysis suggests that the Pathway program approaches, which aim at inculcating learners into the academy, promote the notion that there is a discrete set of more or less universally applicable academic skills that must be mastered for success at university (Lea & Street, 1998). Not only does this approach assume a deficient learner, who lacks some or all of those skills, but it ignores the great variety of approaches to academic work that are present in any university.

The one-dimensional picture of academic learning, where tasks and practices remain static and do not vary across disciplinary boundaries, also suggests that the Pathway program may “reproduce uncritical approaches to knowledge” (Pennycook, 1997, p. 261). The emphasis on academic skills, on imparting rules, and outlining policy tends to simplify expectations for students so that they could emerge from the Pathway context unaware of the complexity and ambiguity they are likely to encounter in the Degree program.

4.2. Text 2: Degree program

In contrast, the Degree program is framed around discipline-specific topics and content learning objectives, with only a minor focus on academic skills. Text 2 below comprises the first few paragraphs of a longer introduction to the Accounting course. It begins with a focus on different perceptions about the field. The introduction continues beyond the extract below to outline a range of expectations for the course.

1 **Introduction**

2 We trust that you will find your study of this unit interesting, enjoyable and
3 personally enriching.

4 As is the case with so many other pursuits in life, the way you will approach the
5 study of accounting will depend upon the perceptions of accounting that you bring
6 to the course. To some, accounting is a “number-crunching” activity that is best
7 suited to boffins who (because of some kind of genetic oddity) enjoy that sort of
8 thing. For others, to understand how to create and understand accounting
9 information is the key to a deeper level of participation in business and other
10 circles of society (“knowledge is power”). For others still, accounting holds the
11 promise of a future interesting career either in accounting itself, or a field in which
12 accounting knowledge is useful.

13 Whether your reason for enrolling in this unit is steeped in one of these or other
14 expectations of accounting (or simply because your program schedule says that
15 [Accounting course] is a compulsory unit!), please take time to contemplate the
16 fact that accounting is all of the above mentioned things – and more!

17 To merely concentrate upon one, or a couple [of] aspects as being most important
18 is to do an injustice to the multi-faceted role that accounting plays in society. As a
19 student it is vitally important that you be open to this possibility lest you be
20 disappointed with this course.

21 Some students enrol in accounting expecting to do a never ending stream of
22 numerically based problems and become uncomfortable and agitated at the very
23 mention of phrases like “write about...”, “think about...”, “what principle
24 underlies...”, “what are the implications of...”, “an alternative treatment is...”, “the
25 limitations of... are...”, etc. The realization that there is room for uncertainties and
26 the need for communication in the seemingly totally explicable and logical process
27 of accounting is a surprise to many students

4.2.1. Metaphors which position the learner

This text is a short extract from an unusually long introduction to a Course Outline which also differs from similar texts in its extensive use of metaphor. Metaphor, understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), is a powerful tool, allowing concepts to be expressed in different ways, adding nuance and interest. However, the cultural specificity of metaphors can mean students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds may have difficulty understanding them (Littlemore, 2003). In this text one set of metaphors refers to accounting as a game: Students “play a role”, and there is mention of the “multi-faceted role of accounting ... in society” (line 18). At the same time, students are positioned inside a simulated rather than “real world” set of activities. The effect of this metaphor is to emphasise the performative aspects of this explanation of the discipline. It calls the reader to “join in the game” and become part of the action that is the discipline of accounting. There is an implication that learners risk remaining marginalised if they do not join in and play the game, supported by other parts of the text, such as in the sentence: “As a student

it is vitally important that you be open to this possibility lest you be disappointed with this course” (lines 19, 20).

Metaphors associated with water, such as flowing or soaking, occur most often with practices the author has assigned to students beginning to study in the course. The students’ motivation for doing the course is “steeped in one of these ... expectations” (line 13). Some students apparently expect to do “a never ending stream of numerically based problems” (line 21). These associations call to mind a static student over whom the learning washes. The student is positioned as a passive recipient of the learning, someone the author passionately urges to change.

4.2.2. *Pronouns and authority*

This text achieves a more dialogic, interactive style than Text 1. This is initially most evident through pronoun use. “We”, the first word in the text, refers to the lecturers on the course, thus separating staff from students, assuming distance rather than commonality between author and audience. Subsequent use of “you” throughout the text, however, sets up a conversational tone that includes the individual student and speaks more directly to them, while still retaining a remote author. As in Text 1, this personal style addresses the student as “you” throughout the introduction, departing from it only where the specific rules and expectations of the course are cited. In these places the more distant terms, “the student” or “students”, are used. The effect of this switching between “you” and “the student” is to make clear the rules and regulations. When related to these regulations, statements with “you” relate clearly to what students can do, while statements with “the student” relate to undesirable activities which students are advised against. This dichotomy seeks to regulate students and define for them what is acceptable in the course. Thus the personal and conversational approach to students is moderated by the authority contained in these warnings about how they should behave in the course.

4.2.3. *Promotional discourses*

Apart from this regulation of the student, this text draws on promotional discourses to impress the novice postgraduate student. Through carefully describing “students’ perceptions of accounting” (line 5) and finally proclaiming that it is “all of the above mentioned things – and more!” (line 16), it points to the complexity of the field and aims to correct misconceptions, promoting the discipline as an interesting choice for students. Higher education is presented as a commodity being sold to the student. The presence of such a strongly promotional tone is an indication of how marketing discourses have entered the field of higher education and show a “shift in relative power of producer and consumer in favour of the latter” (Fairclough, 1992b, p. 280). However, this power held by the student consumer may be only cosmetic. The text promotes the course, emphasising its value to students, but without suggesting any more powerful role for them than as consumers of the educational product.

4.2.4. *Academic literacies in accounting*

The final section of the text (lines 21-27) addresses similar topics to Text 1, hinting at the literacy requirements for studying the Degree program. Direct quotations from the course indicate how students are expected to think, write and deal with the uncertainties of disciplinary knowledge. While the main purpose seems to be to avert students’ preconceived notions about the need for communication in accounting, this listing of terminology also functions as an introduction to the wording in instructions during the course. The references to “uncertainties” (line 25) and “the need for communication” (line 26), hint at the expectations in terms of academic skills. Students are expected to be able to communicate, not simply to calculate. However, what this communication involves or requires of students remains implicit.

The length of Text 2, its use of metaphor and the portrayal of the study and profession of accounting as a complex and theoretical activity, all suggest a very different world from that presented in Text 1. While the Pathway program presents academic skills as transferable to a generalised academic disciplinary context, the Degree program assumes that students have

learned those skills, and instead focuses on disciplinary content. The assumption at both locations is thus that these skills are universally understood.

4.3. The wider nexus of sociocultural practices

At one level these texts reflect “traditional” educational sociocultural practices in which texts and lecturers outline a course by focusing on the rules and regulations, hiding some, and revealing other aspects of what will be taught and how students must behave. Beyond that surface understanding lies “a nexus of practices produced as a result of a particular historical, political, institutional, economic and social environment” (Fairclough, 1992a, p. 71). Among these are the separation between different education sectors, the different ways in which each conducts the business of educating students from overseas, and the ways that English language is perceived in this compartmentalised context.

The Pathway institution is part of the privatised English language sector, positioned on the margins of higher education, offering English for Academic Purposes programs and alternative entry to particular Degree programs. The Degree program aims to prepare students for the accounting profession and to inculcate its own disciplinary discourses. This suggests a disciplinary divide as each location protects and promotes its own discursive resources (Hyland, 2009, p. 53). The Pathway program constructs a world where there is one way to perform academic practices and it positions the student as a novice who needs instruction in this way. The Degree program constructs its academic world as complex and “multifaceted”, warning students about having a conception of the field that is too narrow.

While the Pathway and the Degree programs differ in disciplinary emphasis, they share issues arising from the commercialised higher education environment. These include the variable knowledge and language levels of students entering programs, due in part to marketing departments attracting students based on economic rather than intellectual or educational agendas (Marginson, 2011). This marketing approach results in students having unrealistic expectations about their prospects of success and, for teaching staff, pressures to lower standards (Bretag, 2007; Devos, 2003).

Perceptions around English language are central to the context of these texts. Enhanced proficiency in English is a goal for many visiting students who state it as one of their main reasons for choosing to study overseas (Murray, 2010). They expect to develop English language ability during the Pathway program stage of their studies, but after a 5 or 10 week course there may still be the need for further preparation for disciplinary study. This gap has led to universities being accused of doing little to enable students to improve their English language capabilities during degree programs (Birrell, 2006) and universities responding in the form of initiatives such as testing commencing students and offering concurrent English language tuition. However, the expectation remains that Pathway programs will teach language and academic skills relevant for students’ future contexts. These assumptions suggest that English language is still seen as disconnected from its contexts of use, rather than as a product of social action (Pennycook, 2010), indicating limited awareness of English language as embedded in academic literacies. Overcoming these misperceptions about English language, and its role as integral to the disciplines, is central to the task of addressing the divide between Pathway and Degree programs.

5. Forging better links

Pathway programs can be more relevant to the future study experiences of students if they are able to engage more fully with the content in disciplinary programs. Thus developing better links between programs may simply be a matter of increasing communication across the divide between disciplines. While this may be more easily possible if Pathway and Degree programs are located in close physical proximity, there are barriers to better communication across this disciplinary divide. The specialisation and restricted access to discourses at each disciplinary location may preclude such collaboration.

Pathway program providers face the challenge of how to prepare students destined for a range of different disciplinary destinations. Developing knowledge of practices, texts and curricula in more than one discipline in such an environment requires creative solutions. Even if closer matching is not possible between what is taught at the Pathway program and the different disciplines in the Degree program, a more open and flexible preparatory curriculum could be considered. Ways in which this might be achieved include a shift in emphasis from English language proficiency towards notions of strategic communication (Belcher, 2006); involving students in researching more deeply the academic genres of their future studies (Grey, 2009); and the provision of modularised approaches in pathway programs (Doherty & Singh, 2007). These examples of more open and flexible curricula, alternatives to the one-size-fits-all approach found in this analysis, may go some way towards linking students into the contexts of their future studies.

6. Conclusion

While the texts analysed here are specific to a particular Pathway program and a particular disciplinary context, and findings may not generalise to other contexts, this paper has highlighted the different ways in which introductions to a Pathway program and a Degree program present their disciplinary knowledge and position their student audience. The analysis of Text 1 from the Pathway course suggests that study at university involves the application of a predictable range of skills. The authoritarian tone positions a compliant student who will be successful if they follow the prescriptions set out in the course. In Text 2 the Degree program presents disciplinary knowledge as complex and theoretical and positions its student audience as passive novices, needing to be able to handle that complexity and ambiguity. Thus, each imagines a different student as the recipient of their program, and this mismatch suggests students may find that practices in the discipline vary from those they have learned in the Pathway program.

In the commercialised context of the higher education sector a range of other experiences and knowledges are brought to texts by their readers, which may mean they are interpreted differently. Despite its awareness of the sociocultural context, the close analysis of text as performed in CDA can only partially take account of the full range of activities and practices in each context, some of which can work to alter the effects of texts (Luke, 2002, p. 104). Having highlighted aspects of institutional power and positioning in ways that academic learning is introduced, this analysis opens the way for further research to explain these effects. This could be achieved through analysis of interviews to examine how meanings are available to the student recipients of these texts.

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