



Review of UK transnational education in the Republic of Ireland: University of Dundee and Ballyfermot College of Further Education

October 2017

Executive summary

The University of Dundee (the University) established a partnership with Ballyfermot College of Further Education (BCFE) in 2004 to deliver a BA (Hons) Animation degree. In 2013, the University revalidated the programme and the award was renamed BA (Hons) Visual Media with two pathways: Animation and Game Design. The BA programme is a top-up degree for students on BCFE's two-year Higher National Diploma (HND) programmes in Classical and Computer Animation and Creative Media Production. The top-up programme is currently the University's only validated programme with a partner institution. BCFE has strong links with the creative industry and uses guest speakers extensively to enrich the curriculum and the student experience. Student numbers are capped under the Validation Agreement and currently there are just under 50 students enrolled across both pathways.

A satisfactory revalidation of the programme and partnership arrangement took place in 2016. Overall, the programme is well managed and effective oversight is maintained in keeping with the University's quality assurance procedures, complemented by BCFE's own quality assurance framework. Both the University's and BCFE's Link Coordinators play a pivotal role in the successful management of the programme, acting as key points of contact for communication between the programme team and University School and for students, with whom they meet regularly.

Roles and responsibilities for the oversight of the partnership and the programme are set out in the Validation Agreement, and work is in progress to formalise the role and responsibilities of the Link Coordinators further. BCFE is responsible for recruitment, enrolment and registration of students; however, the entrance qualification attainment level must be approved by the University. BCFE is responsible for assessment, but the University retains responsibility for the appointment of external examiners. The external examiners appointed to the BCFE programme also examine cognate pathways at the University.

The University uses a number of mechanisms to ensure that it remains aware of the local Republic of Ireland higher education context. There is a student representative system in place and elected student representatives receive training for these roles. While students were generally positive about the opportunities presented by their study programme and the accessibility of staff, they did voice concerns about the variability of assessment feedback, insufficient technical support and outdated software. Students enrolled on the programme are BCFE students but have associate student status at the University.

Introduction

1 The University of Dundee (the University) became an independent university in 1967, having been a college of the University of St Andrews since 1897. The University expanded its provision and student numbers between 1994 and 2001, primarily through mergers with Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, Tayside College of Nursing and Midwifery, Fife College of Health Studies and the Dundee Campus of the Northern College of Education. The University has over 17,000 students and around 3,000 staff.

2 The University has around 200 active agreements with international partners from over 15 countries. These arrangements encompass a wide range of different types of collaboration, including international student exchange, articulation, joint doctorates and a very small number of dual degree partnerships, the latter being an area for future development. Among these arrangements are a smaller number of strategic partners, where the University has built relationships that cover a range of activities in different academic disciplines or are particularly complex in nature. One of these strategic partners is Ballyfermot College of Further Education (BCFE).

3 BCFE is a further education college located in Dublin that provides a range of vocational education. It was first established in 1979 as the Senior College Ballyfermot, delivering senior cycle, second level education and pre-employment programmes to local young people. It was later established as a college of further education under the management of the City of Dublin Educational and Training Board (CDETb). BCFE is currently the second largest provider of further education in Ireland, with student enrolment in the region of 1,600.

4 The original collaborative programme between the University and BCFE was first approved as the BA (Hons) Animation in 2004. A periodic programme review took place in 2009, with approval being given by the University to run the programme until 2014. In 2013, the University re-validated the programme and the award was renamed BA (Hons) Visual Media with two pathways: Animation and Game Design. The BA programme is a top-up degree for students on BCFE's two-year HND programmes in Classical and Computer Animation and Creative Media Production (Computer Games Design), feeding into the Animation and Games Design pathways respectively. The BA (Hons) Visual Media - Animation and the BA (Hons) Visual Media - Game Design, delivered by BCFE, are currently the University's only validated programmes. Students enrolled on the programmes are students of BCFE, but have associate student status at the University. The number of students on the programme is capped under the terms of the Validation Agreement - at the time of the review visit there were just under 50 students enrolled across both pathways. BCFE students who successfully complete the validated programme are awarded a University of Dundee degree.

5 The programme partnership was developed as part of a strategic approach to strengthen links between the two institutions, building on their respective subject expertise in animation, visual media and game design. The partnership fits within the University's broader internationalisation strategy, which states that 'internationalisation underpins our vision of the University as internationally leading, creating global opportunities and experience for our graduates...' The strategy also states that '...internationalisation means seeking sustainable partnerships abroad in order to expand our knowledge base and to make our ideas known to the world'.

6 The Validation Agreement specifies the respective individual institutional responsibilities for the partnership and programme and those responsibilities that are shared. Under the terms of the agreement, BCFE is responsible for implementing its own procedures to assure the quality of the validated programmes and to provide annual

monitoring reports to the University. A satisfactory periodic revalidation of the programme took place in January 2016. The University has indicated that, reflective of the maturity and success of the relationship with BCFE, it plans to develop the collaborative arrangement further.

Developing, agreeing and managing arrangements for setting up and operating the link

7 The University Quality Framework for Teaching Collaborations sets out the key steps for the approval, monitoring and periodic review of collaborative arrangements. It is supported by other specific University policies on collaborative taught provision, such as joint, dual or multiple awards, and articulation arrangements.

8 The University takes a cautious approach to collaborative activity and will only consider developing collaborative arrangements with organisations of good standing; where the collaboration is congruent with its mission and compatible with its particular teaching and research strengths; and is of benefit to its students, itself and the partner(s). Proposals for new collaborations must initially be endorsed by the relevant Dean and Associate Dean prior to consideration by the University's Educational Partnerships Development Unit (EPDU). Proposals for collaborative arrangements associated with University academic awards are subject to the approval of the relevant School Board and the Quality and Academic Standards Committee, prior to final approval by one of the University's authorised signatories. In 2015, the University approved a Schedule of Delegation and Decision Making Powers, which specifies who within the University has authority for decisions that commit the University to a contractual arrangement made on its behalf. The authorised signatories for international collaboration agreements are the Principal, the Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching), the Vice-Principal (International) and the University Secretary.

9 The EPDU was established in August 2015, with the aim of supporting new and existing institutional partnerships. The EPDU provides support to University Schools in the assessment of opportunities and development of the business case for new proposals. It is anticipated that in the future the EPDU will also play a role in the review of partnerships. To ensure that that new international partnerships and collaborations are appropriately strategic and high quality, University staff are required to engage the EPDU and use the International Collaborations Toolkit prior to any binding discussion or negotiations taking place with a prospective external partner.

10 The Collaborations Toolkit provides, among other things, forms and templates for different types of collaboration, and a risk assessment table and a due diligence report template. Complementing these forms and templates is a suite of guidance material including: types of collaboration; roles and responsibilities of the partners; proposal development; risk management and due diligence; monitoring and review; and renewal and terminating arrangements. The comprehensive University Collaborations Toolkit is a **positive feature**.

11 The quality assurance processes associated with the validation of external provision are broadly similar to those mechanisms applied to academic provision within the University, including: module and programme approval, monitoring and periodic review, and external examiners. Under the University's Quality Framework for Teaching Collaborations in relation to validated provision, the University will determine the extent to which it exercises direct control over the quality assurance aspects of the programme's management.

12 Validation is the process by which the University judges that a programme developed and taught by another institution, in this case, BCFE, is of an appropriate quality and standard to lead to its award. The University will only validate external provision that is:

equivalent to the University's own provision in terms of standard of award and quality of provision (teaching, learning and student experience); related to existing academic provision and capability within the University; and wholly taught and assessed in the English language, unless expressly agreed by the University.

13 A Link Coordinator is designated by the relevant Dean for each collaborative agreement. The Link Coordinator has a pivotal role as the primary contact point for communication and management of collaborative arrangements. BCFE has also appointed a Link Coordinator for the partnership. External examiners report positively on the effectiveness of the Link Coordinator role at both institutions. The University Link Coordinator has a range of responsibilities (discussed further below) that includes undertaking at least two visits per year to the Irish partner, in November and June/July, to discuss and deal with any operational issues and to meet students. A formal report is prepared following each visit that contributes to the annual monitoring and periodic review process. The interim visits to BCFE (and reporting) by Link Coordinators and their engagement with students is a **positive feature**. The review team noted that the 2016 Periodic Programme Review Report recommended that the role of the Link Coordinators needs to be clarified, formalised and included as part of their workload allocation, which was being followed up by the University and BCFE at the time of the TNE visit.

14 Collaborative arrangements are reviewed annually by the relevant University School and an annual School Learning and Teaching Enhancement Report is then discussed in face-to-face meetings with the Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching) and the Director of Quality and Academic Standards. This dialogue facilitates an effective framework for consideration of 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' strategic matters relating to the enhancement of learning and teaching and the student experience.

15 The current partnership between the University and BCFE is governed by a Validation Agreement signed in 2013, which is valid for five years. A satisfactory revalidation of the programme took place in 2016. The Agreement sets out respective institutional responsibilities for the programme. The University Quality Framework for Teaching Collaborations provides an indicative list of content for collaborative agreements.

16 The review team examined documentation relating to the approval, monitoring and revalidation of the collaborative arrangement, which confirmed that the University and BCFE have demonstrated an effective approach towards strategic development and management of the collaborative partnership. The University monitors partners' in-country regulatory framework through a variety of mechanisms including the Link Coordinator, annual reporting, periodic review, market intelligence generated via the EPDU, and updates provided by QAA Scotland.

17 The review team concluded that the University has developed a culture of robust critical self-evaluation, evidenced through appropriate due diligence and monitoring processes that are consistent with University quality assurance procedures and the requirements of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others*.

Quality assurance

Academic standards

18 The University's policy and procedural framework for taught collaborative arrangements, including international partnerships, are set out in the Quality Framework for Teaching Collaborations. The University's EPDU provides additional supports and resources to University Schools for the development of international collaborative activity.

19 In accordance with University procedures, the University has assigned, in discussion with BCFE, external examiners to visit and review student work and BCFE's assessment methods and grading. External examiners visit BCFE twice per year; at one meeting they meet students to discuss assignments and their overall student experience. Feedback from external examiners regarding the BA (Hons) Visual Media has been generally positive. The University Link Coordinator liaises with the BCFE Link Coordinator across all aspects of the programme management and operation. Programmes are subject to annual programme monitoring and periodic review/revalidation, and these processes are also managed by the Link Coordinators. Link Coordinators also have a coordinating function with the external examiners. The University has formal policies and procedures for the appointment and induction of external examiners and for external examiners covering collaborative arrangements; the University also provides bespoke contextual guidance to examiners.

20 The review team confirmed that external examiner reports were given due consideration and responded to appropriately by the University and BCFE. External examiners may also be consulted on a range of other related areas relevant to their expertise, including the introduction of new programmes, periodic review of programmes or recognition of prior learning.

21 The University supplements the Annual Programme Review process, which principally considers the learning and teaching aspects of programmes, with an International Collaboration Annual Review report template. This latter report is intended to provide University academic leaders with additional information concerning the management and operation of these programmes during the reporting period. This template is aligned with the key performance criteria for international collaborations specified by the University. Completed monitoring reports also contribute to the review and update of the action plan and risk register for the collaboration.

22 The collaborative programme is also subject to BCFE's internal quality assurance procedures, which are set out in the BCFE Quality Manual. There is an Annual Programme Review that involves the teaching team and the University Link Coordinator, and includes analysis of a range of relevant data indicators, such as application numbers, progression statistics, retention, and grade distribution. There is also a periodic cycle of programme evaluation at BCFE, which takes place at least once within a seven-year cycle and is undertaken by an external panel. Student views contribute to both processes via feedback on individual modules, and students' views recorded at regular meetings with the course coordinator and in meetings with external examiners. Graduates are also surveyed, and feedback is included from this perspective. The review team noted that BCFE had recently introduced a formal process of student programme and module evaluation in response to a recommendation in the Periodic Programme Review Report 2016, which will strengthen quality enhancement of provision and facilitate the student voice further.

23 The BCFE Quality Enhancement Group deals with operational quality issues, considers programme evaluations and maintains the BCFE Quality Manual. The Quality Enhancement Group is chaired by a Deputy Principal and can include the University Link Coordinator, as appropriate. The Group meets once per week and reports to the Principal and the Board of Management in an advisory capacity. It has no legal standing within BCFE or the CDETb framework. The Board of Management is a subcommittee of the CDETb.

24 Overall, the review team concluded that the arrangements in place for programme approval, monitoring and re-approval of the BCFE partnership are operationalised in accordance with both institutions' quality assurance frameworks and are appropriate to meet the requirements of the Quality Code, *Chapter B10*. The University and BCFE use a range of

data sets to inform planning and decision making to assure effective oversight of the TNE arrangement.

Assessment

25 Under the Validation Agreement, initial assessment of students is the responsibility of BCFE. BCFE undertakes internal, provisional assessment of all student work, which is then reviewed by the independent external examiners. The University Link Coordinator has an overview of the quality assurance process but does not take part in the actual examination. The grades are finally ratified subject to moderation by an Examination Board chaired by a member of the University. Grading scales are agreed with the University.

26 The University retains ultimate responsibility for the appointment and functions of external examiners. The same external examiners are used across related pathways at the University and BCFE. External examiners report positively about academic standards and assessment at BCFE.

27 The Course and Student Handbooks contain information on assessment, including grading, assessment deadlines and submission, examination regulations, progression and appeals. In addition, during the induction process, students meet each module tutor, who explain the assessment process and requirements as part of the introduction to their module, including information on the assessment timetable, the timing of feedback, and cross moderation of marks.

28 Students who met the review team confirmed that they had an opportunity to look at examples of previous students' work and what was considered to be top/middle/low grade work. Some students, however, indicated that they were not provided with any guidance as to what criteria were used to distinguish between top, middle and low grade assessment submissions.

29 A number of students who met the review team also expressed frustration about the lack of any formative feedback on some module assessments; where this was provided, they were disappointed about the variable quality of the written feedback.

30 The section relating to assessment feedback set out in the Course Handbook appears somewhat ambiguous, as it is headed 'Monitoring Procedures at BCFE, (p.11)', which may suggest that the section refers to quality assurance monitoring rather than assessment feedback to students. For example, the section on 'module review' refers to evaluating student progression at an interim point during the delivery of the module on the basis of a portfolio submission. Students are advised that the tutor will discuss their portfolio with them and follow this up with feedback that is 'informative and descriptive'. Students had mixed views as to whether this monitoring section in the Course Handbook did or did not relate to their assessment feedback.

31 The review team noted that an area identified for consideration by the Periodic Programme Review Panel Board in 2016 related to formalising the approach used to provide assessment feedback to students, such as the introduction of a standard feedback template across all modules. The review team also notes that BCFE has indicated (February 2017) that it would be adopting the University's assessment policy, which requires students to be provided with appropriate, accessible and timely feedback on all forms of assessed work, which 'permits the student to make profitable use of the feedback in preparing and completing subsequent assessment tasks'. The review team would encourage this transition. The review team **recommends** that the University review the Course Handbook to ensure that clear information is provided concerning assessment feedback arrangements to students.

32 Student progression and achievement is considered as part of the annual programme monitoring process. External examiners confirmed that the learning outcomes of the programme and assessment at each level are appropriate. External examiner reports are considered by the programme teams and the University Director of Quality and Academic Standards; and are available to the Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching), the relevant Dean(s) and Associate Dean(s) (Quality and Standards) from the participating Schools, and relevant programme/module leaders. Currently, BCFE students do not have access to external examiner reports, however, the review team notes that under the University assessment policy, external examiner reports will be shared and considered by student representatives, which by extension should be implemented at BCFE in due course.

33 BCFE, in conjunction with the University, has responsibility to convene an examination board for the validated programme to formally consider all student assessment results from each cycle of delivery. The board is convened at a time agreed with the University, and is chaired by the University Link Coordinator. Operation of the Board and the role of the external examiners follow the University's normal procedures.

34 Under the terms of the Validation Agreement students on the programme do not have a right of appeal to the University against a decision of the examination board. The appeals procedure is set out in the BCFE Student Handbook. Any student concerns about decisions of the examination board will be dealt with by BCFE, however, in relation to student concerns against a decision of the examination board (or other decision), the Validation Agreement states that 'Should BCFE consider that the concerns may be valid, BCFE may make representation to the University on the student's behalf. UoD would consider this representation.' Neither staff nor students who met the review team could clearly articulate what this clause meant in practice, and there was no reference to this 'facility' in the Student and Course Handbooks, nor BCFE quality assurance procedures. The review team would encourage the University to ensure that the Validation Agreement content is aligned with information provided to students.

Quality of learning opportunities

35 BCFE is responsible for the recruitment, enrolment and registration of students; however, while BCFE defines the proposed entrance qualifications, these must be approved by the University. All students are registered for a University award on admission. Students undergo a period of induction at BCFE before their course commences. The induction is generally carried out by the course Link Coordinator and members of the teaching team. As specified in the BCFE Quality Manual, topics covered in the student induction include the curriculum to be studied, assessment methods, appeals procedures, library and IT facilities, and health and safety matters. The induction process is complemented by Student and Course Handbooks.

36 Students who met the review team were enthusiastic about the opportunities presented by their study programme and the supportive student community at BCFE, and were positive about the accessibility of BCFE staff and the range of guest speakers from industry that BCFE facilitated. BCFE's strong creative industry links and the range of guest speakers who contribute to the programme is a **positive feature**. BCFE students spoke positively about the opportunity in 2015 to join with University students to attend the Dingle International Film Festival, and welcomed opportunities to share experiences between cohorts, such as project work.

37 Students did, however, raise a number of concerns with the review team, including: access to BCFE in the evening; the need for additional technical support, in terms of sound expertise and professional practice skills; late changes to assessment briefs; and outdated software. Students reported positively about having access to University electronic

resources, in particular, the availability of 'digital tutors', although the review team noted that one external examiner had indicated that there may be an over-reliance on this facility. Some students also expressed frustration that problems of access to the University virtual learning environment is a recurring issue. The review team **recommends** that the University regularly monitor the resource requirements of the programme to ensure that students have access to appropriate software and supports.

38 The review team notes that the issues raised by students had already been picked up via earlier quality monitoring reports such as external examiner reports, the Periodic Programme Review Report, and records of meetings with students and Link Coordinators. The review team concluded that BCFE and the University are responding to the issues raised by students, insofar as current resource constraints allow. That academic standards are being maintained was evident from external examiner reports, the periodic programme review findings and the employability of graduates. The students whom the review team met appeared to be unaware of the active consideration of their issues by BCFE and the University. The review team **recommends** that the University evaluate the effectiveness of the processes used to inform students of actions that have been taken (or reasons why action is mitigated) in response to issues raised by them.

39 BCFE uses informal and formal processes to resolve complaints. The complaints process is set out in the BCFE Quality Manual (30, Section B4.7), which includes a generic statement that says students who are studying for an external award may complain directly to the awarding body. The right to make a complaint to the awarding body (as set out in the BCFE Quality Manual) would appear to be in conflict with the information provided to the review team in meetings with staff and the Validation Agreement. The latter states that BCFE is responsible for 'operating effective procedures for dealing with student disputes, complaints, appeals or concerns about the provision of the validated programme or related academic or other services'. The University's role involves monitoring of such complaints; as appropriate, it may 'make recommendations to, required actions by, or stipulate conditions to BCFE, which it is bound to implement'.

40 In the meeting with students, the review team learned that students did receive information concerning how to make an academic appeal, however, while the students were not aware of the written complaints procedure they did have a general understanding that it was best to try and resolve complaints informally, and that they could seek advice from the Link Coordinators. The review team did not find any reference to student complaints in the Student or Course Handbooks or the student induction outline slides. The review team **recommends** that the University ensure that students are provided with clear information relating to student complaints in accessible documents, such as Course or Student Handbooks, and that the information provided is consistent with the Validation Agreement.

41 BCFE operates a student representative system and has established guidelines for student representatives at meetings, which are set out in the BCFE Quality Manual. This information might also usefully be included in the Student Handbook.

42 As a minimum, there are two meetings with class representatives per year, with usually a maximum of two elected student representatives per class group. Matters raised by student representatives that need to be followed up will be fed back by the Link Coordinator to the whole class group. Student representatives are also ex officio members of the Student Council, where they can raise college-wide issues with BCFE management. There are termly formal meetings between the Student Council and college management. Students are also represented on the BCFE Board of Management, in accordance with CDETB guidelines.

43 The review team noted that BCFE provides training for new student representatives; the course Link Coordinator liaises with student representatives for each class group, and briefs them on participation in team meetings and how to disseminate information to and from the class they represent. To further support BCFE students undertaking representative roles, consideration is being given to the involvement of the University Students' Association, which is involved in training student representatives at the University.

44 Students who met the review team indicated that they were aware of the range of support that is available to students, and that related information was set out in the Student Handbook, including careers service, counselling, library, the Disability Officer and IT technical support.

45 As a constituent college of the CDET B, BCFE operates staff appointment procedures under the rules and regulations as set out by the Irish Department of Education and Skills. These regulations relate to recruitment and selection procedures for the appointment and promotion of teachers in vocational colleges. All new staff undertake an induction process both on a one-to-one and group basis. To complement the induction process, each member of staff is allocated a mentor to support their professional development and assist them in navigating BCFE systems and procedures. Although limited by budget, BCFE supports specific staff training and development needs. A number of staff met by the review team indicated that they had had an opportunity to visit the University, which they found beneficial. A number of continuing professional development courses are provided by the curriculum development unit of the CDET B.

Information on higher education provision

46 The University and BCFE Link Coordinators have a key role as a first point of contact and disseminating information concerning the partnership and/or programme.

47 The University's expectations in relation to the information to be provided to prospective and current students is set out in the University's Quality Framework, which includes the programme specification and information about complaints and appeals. It is expected that Schools will monitor information provided to students and prospective students, including a review of the website(s) on a regular basis. In meetings with the review team, staff indicated that student information was periodically reviewed as part of the periodic programme review process, every five years.

48 The Validation Agreement states that all student publicity and recruitment information regarding the validated programme must be submitted in advance to the University for approval. It was also noted that in response to the Periodic Programme Review Report 2016 recommendation to formalise the role of the Link Coordinator, these responsibilities would include approving the prospectus content. The review team **recommends** that the University develop a more regular and systematic process for monitoring information provided by BCFE to students and prospective students.

49 Students from BCFE who successfully complete the validated programme are entitled to attend a graduation ceremony at the University. Local graduation ceremonies may be arranged in Dublin subject to negotiation between the partners. In such cases, a senior representative of the University will be present at the ceremony to confer the degree. The University has sole responsibility for the control and issue of formal assessment results, transcripts, and degree award certificates.

Conclusion

The University's partnership with BCFE is currently the University's only validated arrangement, and reflects both the maturity of the relationship and the confidence that the University has in BCFE to deliver the top-up programmes. The review team noted the close working engagement between University and BCFE staff. Both institutions have well-established reputations in the complementary disciplines of visual media, animation and game design. Overall, academic standards are maintained, and the various quality assurance processes are effective. The University and BCFE are aware of, and are responding to, the challenge of maintaining an appropriate level of industry standard software for students, insofar as budget constraints will permit. While University and BCFE staff have regular engagements with students, there appears to be some scope to enhance the effectiveness of the student feedback loop.

The level of interaction between the two institutions, particularly in relation to the Link Coordinators, is commendable.

Positive features

The following positive features are identified:

- the comprehensive University Collaborations Toolkit (paragraph 10)
- the interim visits to BCFE (and reporting) by Link Coordinators and their engagement with students (paragraph 13)
- BCFE's strong creative industry links and the range of guest speakers who contribute to the programme (paragraph 36).

Recommendations

The University of Dundee is recommended to take the following action:

- review the Course Handbook to ensure that clear information is provided concerning assessment feedback arrangements to students (paragraph 31)
- regularly monitor the resource requirements of the programme to ensure that students have access to appropriate software and support (paragraph 37)
- evaluate the effectiveness of the processes used to inform students of actions that have been taken (or reasons why action is mitigated) in response to issues raised by them (paragraph 38)
- ensure that students are provided with clear information relating to student complaints in accessible documents, such as Course or Student Handbooks, and that the information provided is consistent with the Validation Agreement (paragraph 40)
- develop a more regular and systematic process for monitoring information provided by BCFE to students and prospective students (paragraph 48).

The University of Dundee's response to the review report

The University of Dundee is committed to enhancement of the quality of its provision and processes and welcomes this report from the Panel. The recommendations have helped us to identify areas where we could further enhance this collaborative arrangement. Most of the recommendations have already been discussed with BCFE and plans are underway to address each of the areas for development. The University is very pleased to note the positive features identified by the Panel.

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