

## STEP UP to University: Continuity and belonging for articulation students

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### ABSTRACT

Articulation plays a key role in widening access to HE, but tailored support is necessary for a smooth transition. Articulating students often see themselves as lacking key skills and express concern at the significant differences between college and university. This case study explores how the academic skills team at the University of Dundee supports articulation through STEP UP: a credit-bearing module designed for students enrolled on a Social Sciences Higher National Certificate (HNC) course at Dundee and Angus College who hold a direct entry place for second year Humanities at the university. A key strength of the STEP UP approach is its emphasis on continuity between college and university, welcoming students to the University during their college year. Students implement feedback on their college writing to complete their first university essay, providing them with a clear link between their college and university assignments. They also reflect on their transition by creating a reflective output and presenting a group project on 'Becoming, Being, and Belonging' as a university student. Rather than adopting a deficit approach, emphasising the 'gap' between college and university, STEP UP empowers students to recognise the skills they have developed during their HNC and identify how to employ these skills at university. As Scottish institutions adjust to the new tertiary landscape, STEP UP demonstrates how emphasising continuity rather than difference can help articulation students develop their sense of belonging at university.

**Keywords:** tertiary, transitions, articulation, student support, belonging

### Introduction

The theme of transitions has been central to higher education (HE) in Scotland over the past decade, particularly through its inclusion as the Quality Assurance Agency's theme for 2014-2017 (QAA Scotland, 2017). This Enhancement Theme highlighted that an understanding of transitions must go beyond that of the 'typical' undergraduate moving from school to university and must also encapsulate the experiences of students at other points and from different backgrounds (QAA Scotland, 2023). One such demographic is articulation students, who transition into university after first gaining a qualification from a Further Education (FE) college. Robertson and Cunningham (2023) outline the prominence of articulation in Scottish HE, as nearly a third of Scottish university students enter via colleges, many with advanced standing, where they receive full credit for their college work and enter directly into Level (year) Two or Three. Articulation is seen as highly beneficial for widening access and plays a key role in the Scottish Government's strategy to improve routes into higher education (Gallacher, 2014; Lalley & Adetutu, 2022).

The new Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF) will further expand articulation as it seeks to provide a "more coherent and streamlined tertiary education system" (Scottish Funding Council, 2023, TQEF Vision section). This normalisation of transitions through FE and HE requires a new focus on the support universities offer to incoming students. Articulation students bring with them a unique set of

strengths and needs which are often unrecognised by staff in HE institutions. These students may struggle with aspects of independent learning, assessment, and time management, and may not immediately see themselves as “legitimate members” of the university community (Christie et al., 2013, p. 626). This lack of belonging can be deepened by some transitions initiatives, which operate according to a deficit model and see articulation students as lacking essential university skills (Breeze, et al., 2020). Such support primarily focuses on filling assumed gaps in students’ knowledge, thus implicitly representing their experiences in FE as inferior to their peers’ in HE. In contrast, effective transitions support should help articulation students recognise the key skills they have developed at college and identify how to utilise these in a university context.

At the University of Dundee, the STEP UP to University module has supported transitioning articulation students since 2015. These students enter through the Scottish Government’s additional funded places scheme (Scottish Funding Council, 2013), which accepts fifty ‘associate students’ each year (University of Dundee, 2024). This paper focuses on half of these students, who are enrolled on the Humanities stream and complete a one-year Higher National Certificate (HNC) at Dundee and Angus college before entering directly into Level Two study at the University of Dundee. During their HNC year, the associate students are also fully matriculated at the University, where they complete the 20-credit STEP UP module in Semester 2, concurrently with their college work. The module is tailored specifically to associate students and integrated with their college studies, identifying differences between college and university but also making connections between their learning.

With the shift to the new tertiary framework, the STEP UP module offers unique insights into the type of support that is most beneficial for students transitioning from FE to HE. This paper will focus on the module assessments to demonstrate how emphasising continuity between college and university fosters a culture of belonging for articulation students. Assessment is a key area for articulation student support, as it is often the assessed work that drives student effort and learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Moreover, assessment is particularly significant for articulation students, as the shift in assessment practices from college to university has been likened to a culture shock (O’Donnell et al., 2018, p. 32). This paper will identify strategies for lessening this culture shock by introducing articulation students to unfamiliar aspects of the university environment while building on the skills they gained in college.

### Assessing engagement and participation

Engagement with the learning environment is a key aspect for articulation student transitions, as it has been shown to be correlated with student success, both in terms of grades and in longer-term retention (Adeel et al., 2023; Kuh et al., 2008). Engagement can be challenging for articulation students, however, as they are used to the interactive style of a small college classroom and are likely to be unfamiliar with large university lectures. Indeed, the Scottish Government’s report on articulation notes how college and university can have “radically different ‘learning cultures’” (Scottish Government, 2017, para. 10). Transitions support must help students understand and adapt to the university’s learning culture, with the recognition that such a culture is shaped in no small part by the students themselves (Kendall, et al., 2018). To directly address this shift in classroom culture, the STEP UP module utilises a 10% Engagement and Participation grade. Instead of setting out a list of appropriate behaviours and expecting students to conform, however, the criteria for the grade are co-created with students. Co-creation requires openness and dialogue on the part of both students and staff, but it can empower students and give them ownership

of their assessment (Meer & Chapman, 2015). In week two of STEP UP, as part of a class on lectures and note-taking, tutors facilitate an exercise where students consider what behaviours constitute effective engagement at university. While students often initially list activities related directly to classes, such as attending lectures, arriving on time, and asking/answering questions, the workshop encourages them to explore other means of participation, such as listening, contributing to group tasks, completing online work, or asking for help when necessary. This workshop takes the form of a Diamond Nine activity, where students identify nine forms of engagement and arrange them in a diamond shape with the most important at the top and the least important at the bottom (Perkins, 2022). At the end of the exercise, it is the behaviours identified by students, in discussion with teaching staff, that form the assessment criteria.

One element of engagement that articulation students typically do not mention in their initial discussion is engagement within the digital space. To encourage engagement within digital spaces, STEP UP includes online activities each week, such as quizzes, discussion boards, and journals. Increasing online engagement is beneficial for articulation students, both because familiarity with online tools is necessary for university success, but also because online activities can allow for a more equitable measurement of participation. For quieter students, or those who struggle with anxiety, online activities can provide a less stressful opportunity for sharing thoughts and receiving feedback (Polat et al., 2022). Moreover, students from underrepresented socioeconomic groups may feel more comfortable participating online than in class (Campbell & McAdam, 2022). The use of online activities, then, can provide articulation students with a means of engagement that is less daunting than speaking out in large university classes. This hypothesis has been borne out within the STEP UP module, as many students with the strongest online presence are those who tend to be quieter within the classroom.

The Engagement and Participation grade on the STEP UP module supports articulation students' transitions by including their views in the assessment criteria and making space for their voices in the digital space. While institutions often place students in the deficit position, requiring them to fit into established norms (Rainford, 2016), the STEP UP module helps students critically reflect on university expectations and shape their own classroom environment. This student-centeredness is increasingly reflected across the HE sector, as institutions shift away from lectures and towards the more personal, discussion-based style of teaching that is prevalent in FE colleges (Scottish Funding Council, 2024). As articulation students frequently express concern at the lack of personal interaction at university (Christie et al., 2006), it is appropriate for HE providers to respond by attempting to integrate deeper human connection in classes, rather than requiring students to adapt to a less personal style of learning.

### Written assessments

Academic writing is another crucial area for transitions support, as articulation students often have different expectations regarding aspects such as criticality, argument, structure, and academic language (Jessen & Elander, 2009). In many cases, the support offered by universities is designed "to overcome transition deficits and lack of formal academic skills training" (Peake, 2018, p. 91). What such approaches miss, however, is the recognition that, while articulation students may not have the same skillset as those who have gone through Level 1 at university, they bring with them other skills that traditional students may not have developed. McKay and Devlin (2014, p. 954) argue that universities must stop viewing non-traditional students as "underprepared or intellectually deficient," and instead adopt "a more positive conceptualisation of the knowledge students bring with them to higher education." When supporting

articulation students with academic writing, universities must seek to build on the skills students have already developed at college.

The written STEP UP assessments are designed to make explicit the differences between college and university writing while simultaneously identifying how the students' work at college has prepared them for their university assignments. This is accomplished through a two-stage process, where students submit a formative 'essay diagnostic' and receive feedback on their areas of strength and development in advance of their first summative essay. When students submit the summative essay several weeks later, markers will return to these same areas and comment upon the student's improvement. This scaffolded process allows students to receive personalised recommendations on how to tailor their writing for university, followed quickly by feedback on their development so far.

A key element of the diagnostic is that it is ungraded; students receive feedback but no numerical mark. Initially, teaching staff intended to provide a grade, but it was quickly noted that a university marking rubric was not suitable for grading work written for college. Although many elements of good writing are the same, college markers often look for depth of information while university tutors privilege argument and academic references (Itua et al., 2014). To provide a grade for the diagnostic, then, would be to unfairly penalise students for simply following their college criteria. Instead, the focus of the diagnostic marking is on feedback, which takes the format of several positive comments followed by two 'for your first university essay' points designed to feed into their academic essay. This approach draws a direct connection between their college work and their university writing, explicitly identifying the skills students have already developed while encouraging them to adopt certain characteristics required at university.

When marking these essays, staff on the STEP UP module have noted the most common areas for development concern argument and use of sources. Specifically, students' college submissions have tended to be information-rich, using sources such as textbooks to provide detailed descriptions of the topic. In most cases, however, the submissions used their sources primarily for information rather than as evidence to advance an argument. When students did present their own opinions, these were often confined to the conclusion, rather than woven throughout in a structured argument. It is easy for university staff to see this writing style as lacking, however, it is necessary to also recognise the strengths inherent in this approach. For example, the articulation students demonstrated an impressive ability to manage detailed sources, such as primary documents, and to explain complex ideas in simple terms. Their work was also well-balanced, with good attention to both sides of challenging issues. These skills, though often overlooked, are essential for university success, and transitions support should recognise their importance and communicate this to students through feedback.

One final element of the essay writing process which generates significant discussion is that of the submission itself. While students have also used Turnitin plagiarism checking software at college, the mechanics of deadlines and grading are starkly different. At the college, students are expected to adhere to deadlines, but there is no reduction in marks for late submission. This contrasts starkly with the university's approach, where every 24-hour period past the deadline results in a one-point penalty, with no submissions accepted more than five days after the deadline (unless there are mitigating circumstances, in which case the students must submit a form for approval). Furthermore, at college, if a student has not met all the criteria, the work may be returned for the student to complete remediation. The process of submitting the essay and receiving a single grade is new to the STEP UP students and must be clarified both verbally and in the module handbook to ensure students are familiar with submission procedures.

It is important to include this practical note concerning submission as it is often these details that generate significant student attention and anxiety. Articulation students, particularly, often report uncertainty regarding university procedures, including those surrounding assessment (Cree et al., 2009). Although the use of feedback is key to helping students adjust to university expectations regarding academic writing, this must be accompanied by an understanding of the practical aspects. Unfamiliar assessment procedures risk alienating articulation students and causing feelings of disconnect (Christie, et al., 2013). In other words, a lack of attention to the differences in procedure may undo the work accomplished through the careful scaffolding of feedback opportunities. When supporting articulation students, it is essential to blend academic training with practical support.

### Reflective assessments

The primary challenge for articulation student support is the students' sense of not fully belonging at university. This feeling is particularly acute for students on the STEP UP module, who are enrolled simultaneously at college and at university and thus have a dual identity. Students report struggling with this identity personally, as well as receiving negative comments from peers who do not understand the articulation route and who see college as less demanding than university. Although STEP UP is primarily designed to offer academic support, such support cannot exist in a vacuum. Indeed, peer groups and student societies often have a more significant impact on students' belonging than their academic performance (Ahn & Davis, 2019). Consequently, the module works to provide a space for students to reflect on elements of their transition experience, such as societies, nights out, part time work, moving away from home, living in halls, and mental health. All these elements of the 'student experience' are impacted by the articulation students' dual identity and will play a role in their sense of belonging at university.

To address these struggles with identity and belonging, STEP UP includes two reflective assessments which encourage students to consider their experiences over the past year and their place in the university. The Reflective Output, worth 10% of the final grade, asks students to reflect through producing a creative piece, which is submitted alongside a short reflective summary. The Group Presentation, worth 40%, is a more traditional presentation, where students work together on a 15-minute presentation on the theme of "Being, Belonging and Becoming a Student at the University of Dundee." Taken together, these assignments encourage both individual reflection, through the highly personal Reflective Output, and group reflection, where students discuss their experiences and put them in context within the presentation. These assessments allow students to reflect on the challenges of their articulation year and to explore their identity as university students.

The reflective assessments, particularly the creative Output, provide students with a broader picture of what counts as 'academic'. While reflection is highly beneficial to student development, it is often misunderstood and underestimated (Moon, 2004). Specifically, it may be seen as a waste of time, or as a less-academic alternative to theory or hard evidence (Thompson & Thompson, 2018). In contrast, reflection is beneficial precisely because it blends the personal with the critical, allowing the practitioner to honestly reflect on their thoughts, feelings, and assumptions, while simultaneously analysing these emotions to reach greater understanding (Bassot, 2020). Furthermore, Gravett et al. (2021) argue that "create[ing] space to get to know and appreciate students' lives and contexts beyond the classroom" helps develop a more "relational" pedagogy, defined by caring rather than power disparity. The reflective assignments on

STEP UP break down the boundary between personal and academic, modeling a view of the university where the students' personal lives matter deeply in the classroom.

The Reflective Output is arguably the most innovative assessment on the module, requiring students to reflect on their articulation experience through a piece of creative work. The type of work submitted varies widely; students have created artistic pieces including songs, dances, poems, short stories, photo collages, paintings, and vlogs, while others have chosen activities such as woodworking or baking. Whatever the submission, the criteria make clear that students are not marked according to artistic ability. Students are encouraged to use this assignment as an opportunity to reconnect with a favourite hobby, but their grade does not depend on the artistic merit of the output. Rather, the criteria focus on the connection between the output and the student's articulation experience. Two of the five criteria relate directly to the output while the remaining three address the reflective summary:

**Table 1: Reflective output marking criteria**

<b>The Output</b>	
20%	The Output's design is creative and thoughtful, demonstrating clear engagement with the task. (Note: this criterion does <i>not</i> include artistic ability).
20%	The Output has a clear connection to the student's articulation experience. The connection can be evident in the Output itself or explained through the reflective summary.
<b>The Summary</b>	
20%	The summary is personal rather than generic, exploring the students' own expectations, motivations, and reactions to their experiences.
20%	The summary is analytical, discussing and questioning specific thoughts and experiences rather than relying on general statements.
20%	The summary is future-oriented and purposeful, with a clear action plan for improvement.

Over the nine years the STEP UP module has run, the Reflective Output is the assessment that has generated the most student questions, but also the one where they have consistently produced the strongest work. The final outputs themselves are largely impressive, allowing students to communicate their experiences through a non-traditional medium. While every year there are a selection of students who do not deeply engage, submitting a 'collage' of some three photos or a writing sample produced by AI, the majority create pieces that are both artistically striking and clearly related to their personal development. Indeed, the assessment has been so successful as a vehicle for students to reflect on their transition that it has been adopted by introductory modules in other disciplines across the university.

The second reflective assessment is a Group Presentation, where students present on the theme of "Becoming, Being and Belonging as a University of Dundee Student." The theme of the presentation draws on the AdvanceHE "What Works? Student Retention and Success" report (Thomas, 2012) and explicitly directs the students to consider their sense of belonging at university. Thomas argues that belonging is crucial for improving both student retention and success, and identifies how early interventions focused on student's expectations and academic skills can increase feelings of belonging. Walton and Brady (2017, p. 272) define belonging as "a feeling of being accepted, included, respected in, and contributing to a setting, or anticipating the likelihood of developing this feeling." This idea of anticipation is crucial to articulation

students, who may look forward to belonging at university, even as they currently do not see themselves as part of the community. Similarly, it can be helpful for articulation students to recognise that students who enter university through more traditional pathways may experience similar struggles with belonging.

A key element of the group presentation is the use of sources to contextualise their experiences. Although students from non-traditional backgrounds may feel isolated at university, learning about peers undergoing similar experiences may increase their sense of belonging (Read et al., 2003). To begin, students are encouraged to read the AdvanceHE report, but they then conduct their own research to identify relevant sources. Appropriate sources may include government data, reports from universities, or publications from student unions or educational bodies. Unsurprisingly, searching for this grey literature poses a challenge, as these sources are often not available on the library website and students may not be aware of what to look for when using a search engine. To provide support in this area, an academic librarian facilitates a session in week eight, guiding students through the process of searching for grey literature and evaluating appropriate sources. Since this session was implemented in 2021/22, student use of secondary sources in presentations has increased significantly, giving them a wider perspective on the transition into university. Crucially, students are able to contextualise difficult experiences, such as loneliness or anxiety, and recognise that their struggles are not unique.

Through these two assessments, the Reflective Output and the Group Presentation, STEP UP students spend much of the second half of the module engaged in some type of reflection. Although reflection as assessment may run the risk of exacerbating existing power dynamics, providing opportunities for reflection in a variety of modes and media allows students to engage with the aspects of belonging which actively matter to them (Gravett, 2023). The focus on reflection recognizes that, as Gale and Parker (2012) claim, "It is impossible... to speak of student transition in HE in the singular." Rather, the articulation students are encouraged to critically explore the unique challenges and opportunities of their own unique set of transitions. Reflection ties the year together, empowering students to write their own continuous narrative from their time at college to the beginning of their university studies. Through reflection, the module emphasises the continuity of students' development, encouraging them to see even the challenging aspects of their articulation year as part of their personal transition.

### Areas for development

As highlighted throughout this discussion, assessment is a key aspect of students' sense of belonging and hence of effective transitions support. Assessment and feedback are known to play a significant role in students' self image, particularly "how you value yourself and how you see yourself as a worthy human being" (Balloo et al., 2024). More positively, work on authentic assessment emphasizes the role assessment plays in student's development, claiming that assessment should "not only be about what students know, but who they are becoming" (Ajjawi et al., 2023, p. 504). Much of the focus in planning and refining the STEP UP module, then, has focused on its approach to assessment and feedback. Crucially, the assessment has been designed to connect and scaffold from the student's work at college, as well as to encourage a whole-person approach allowing the students to bring their authentic selves into their assessed work. The STEP UP module has hitherto focused on developing students' sense of belonging through the design and implementation of assessments.

Given the foundational nature of assessment, a current priority for development in the STEP UP module is exploring the causes for student's non-engagement with assessment. Data from the past five years has

demonstrated that engagement with the module assessments is closely linked to retention on the articulation route. Since 2019, all students who engaged with the module and submitted key assessments have earned a pass. Nearly a quarter of enrolled students (23.7%), however, failed due to lack of engagement (see Table 2). In approximately two-thirds of those cases, the students had not engaged with the module at all, largely because they chose to leave the articulation route before the module began. In another third of cases, however, accounting for 8.5% of all students enrolled on the module, they attempted to engage yet ultimately failed due to non-submission of key assessments. In every case, failure was due to lack of engagement with module assessments, not to poor quality of submitted work.

**Table 2: STEP UP enrollment and retention**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Enrolled</i>	<i>Pass</i>	<i>Fail (due to non-submission)</i>	<i>No Engagement</i>
<b>2019</b>	24	21	0	3
<b>2020</b>	22	16	3	3
<b>2021</b>	21	14	2	5
<b>2022</b>	29	23	1	5
<b>2023</b>	22	16	4	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>18</b>

This data demonstrates the importance of transitions support that goes beyond the assessments specifically to address the broader barriers articulation students face when engaging with their courses. Indeed, articulation students' challenges are often less tangible, such as the "dislocating effects" of finding their way around a large campus, or the perception of university staff as "more distant" (Christie, 2008, pp. 570-571). In the case of STEP UP, a crucial barrier has been the short timespan of the module, running from January to March. The majority of students who failed the module had already disengaged with the articulation route before STEP UP began. To increase engagement and attainment, transitions support must allow for connection and belonging to development in a more sustained way, ideally beginning even before students formally arrive at university (Fokkens-Bruinsma et al., 2021). Furthermore, as Tett et al. (2017, p. 403) argue, student transitions are not "one-off events" but are rather "an on-going process that develops over time". A priority area of development for the STEP UP team is, then, the extension of support over the full academic year rather than simply the second semester.

Providing cohesive support to articulation students is made more challenging by the lack of alignment between university semesters and the college year. In Scotland, universities tend to run two semesters, from September to December and from January to April. In contrast, colleges follow the school terms, beginning in late August and running through mid-May, with frequent short breaks that coincide with school holidays. The STEP UP module is still more limited, as it runs for a single semester from January-March. In previous years, staff have held several welcome events for articulation students in semester one, such as a matriculation tour in September and a college visit day in November. These events have been beneficial for fulfilling the technical aspects of matriculation, but two sessions are insufficient to build any personal connection between students and university staff. Furthermore, there have been no touchpoints after the conclusion of the module until the students arrive at university the following September.



In the current academic year, the module team has expanded the number of touchpoints for the students. In addition to the sessions from previous years, the module lead made an initial visit to the college in August, before the university term began. A tour of the university library tour has also been arranged for mid-semester, familiarising students with a central campus building and the resources available. Finally, an additional college visit is scheduled for the end of semester where students will be introduced to the module virtual learning environment, supporting them with the transition to a new set of digital systems. The aim is that these interventions will support student belonging by offering them more opportunities to interact with university staff and the campus itself. Similarly, after the module's conclusion, additional sessions may increase student engagement over the summer and improve retention on the articulation route, though these have yet to be developed.

The STEP UP module itself is largely an effective means of support for students who engage with its content and assessments. The module is limited, however, by its 11-week run from January to March, which does not align with key moments in the student's articulation journey, such as their college induction and their final exams. As induction for articulation students is most effective as an ongoing process (Tait & Godfrey, 2001), the STEP UP module has shifted to a broader approach more aligned to the students' college terms. Gravett and Winstone (2019) argue that transitions support must move beyond short-term interventions targeted at key points in the university calendar and instead adopt a model which recognises "individual lived temporal rhythms". More work is needed to unpin STEP UP from the university semester and integrate its support more closely with the college to acknowledge the associate students' unique timeline.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the STEP UP module demonstrates how articulation support can eschew a deficit model through recognising not only the differences but also the areas of continuity between FE and HE. In situations where students are more likely to focus on differences, such as the articulation route, it is doubly important to direct attention - of both students and staff - towards similarities. Effective transitions support will undoubtedly involve explicit discussions of the divergences between college and university, but it will do so in an environment where these differences are not loaded with implicit value judgements. Articulation students may benefit from instruction in how to undertake university assessments, but they should also be encouraged to identify how the volume and variety of assessment they have completed at college makes them uniquely equipped for success at university.

This focus on continuity between college and university will become even more necessary as Scotland adopts the new Tertiary Framework, with its aim of "effective and successful transitions" as one of its key principles (Scottish Funding Council, 2023, TQEF Principles section). As the vision for quality enhancement in FE and HE converges, it is crucial that staff involved in transitions support adopt a similarly aligned vision of student progression. Articulation must not be seen as an inferior route into HE, leaving students with a skills deficit and a lack of belonging. Rather, the sector must recognise the diversity and multiplicity of learner journeys and the variety of skills and attributes students gather on the way. Such a vision of support has long been advocated for in the literature, and the Scottish sector now finds itself in an ideal position to implement new practical initiatives designed to streamline transitions and encourage student belonging within the tertiary sector.

The STEP UP module provides a helpful blueprint for the type of practical initiatives which may be beneficial within this new landscape. Over the past nine years, the STEP UP module has been uniquely positioned to

support students during their transition. The module helps students understand and shape the classroom environment through the co-created Engagement and Participation grade. Additionally, the scaffolding Essay Diagnostic and Academic Essay use feedback to explore the similarities and differences between writing styles. Finally, the Reflective Output and Group Presentation provide students with a variety of methods to reflect on their sense of belonging within the university community. Although further work is needed to provide support outwith the university semester, the module assessments provide a model for how transitions support should work within the tertiary sector. Overall, the STEP UP module demonstrates how transitions support can move beyond a deficit approach by emphasising continuity rather than difference.

### Biography

Rachel Horrocks-Birss is an Academic Literacies Developer at the University of Dundee. She leads the STEP UP module which supports articulation students as they transition from college to university. Rachel also leads the TESTA process and supports assessment and feedback development across the University.

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