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Employability Challenges Facing Vocal Art Graduates in South Africa: A Case Study of Tshwane University of Technology

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Abstract

Unemployment has emerged as a global phenomenon that brutally affects young people, irrespective of whether they have academic qualifications, but is more prevalent and predominant in semi-peripheral and peripheral countries. Like graduates from other emerging countries, South African graduates are experiencing unemployment. The issue of unemployment in the performing arts industry has become a matter of great concern. Vocal Art (hereafter VA) graduates are finding it increasingly challenging to find a bridge between university and the industry of their profession. This article reports on a study that explored the relevance of the Performing Arts (Vocal Art) curriculum at the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), Pretoria, South Africa, to employment opportunities for its graduates. A qualitative research method was employed using approaches such as a review of scholarly writings and interviews with arts graduates, lecturers, employers, VA performers, and selected performing arts industry practitioners and leaders. The findings demonstrated that there are a high number of arts graduates battling to find employment which is partly attributable to a lack of specific skills not catered for in the present curriculum. The study identified these special and relevant skills crucial for the performing arts industry. The article concludes by affirming that the TUT curriculum has to be redesigned, restructured and aligned with the continuously changing performing arts industry.

Keywords: unemployment; performing arts industry; Vocal Art; graduates; curriculum

Introduction

This article reports on study that set out to investigate and interrogate the employability of university graduates of the performing arts, with a specific focus on vocal art (hereafter VA) (professional singing courses). The study was premised on observations and revelations of unemployment in the performing arts industry in South Africa and internationally.

A study by the International Labour Organization (ILO 2011) demonstrated that unemployment among graduates has become an area of global concern, including in South Africa. It is also vital to note that the current study was propelled by the perception among scholars that South African graduate unemployment shows no improvement. However, more recent studies (Van Broekhuizen 2015; Van der Berg et al. 2011) have shown that graduates continue to battle to find employment. Therefore, the main question is: Does the battle to find employment also apply to VA or singing graduates?

Scholars point to rising challenges regarding graduate employment as a phenomenon that requires special attention (Van Broekhuizen 2015; Van der Berg et al. 2011). Yende (2017) found that unemployment affects youth brutally, irrespective of their professions. However, VA graduates are the most affected by unemployment in South Africa (Yende 2017).

South Africa's higher education policy structure has three institutional classifications, namely: universities, comprehensive universities, and universities of technology (Subbaye 2017, 250). Regarding these three categories, universities of technology predominantly cater for vocational or career-focused undergraduate diplomas and bachelor's degrees (e.g. BTech), with a limited number of master's and doctoral programmes (Bunting and Cloete 2010, 2). Meanwhile, universities offer basic formative degrees (e.g. BA and BSc), professional undergraduate degrees (e.g. BSc Engineering and MBChB), and various honours, master's and doctoral degrees at the postgraduate level. On the other hand, comprehensive universities straddle and provide programmes typical of universities and universities of technology. However, despite this categorisation, almost all these higher education institutions (HEIs) offer vocational or career-focused arts or music in particular (VA included) courses/programmes.

Although there is extensive literature on graduate unemployment in South Africa and worldwide (ILO 2011), limited attention has been given to investigating the employment opportunities and challenges experienced and the potential implications for VA graduates in particular.

The current study was motivated by Yende's (2017) study which highlights that VA graduates at Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), Pretoria, South Africa, possess the skills to be opera singers, such as acting, singing, and sight-reading. However, many of these graduates do not have the additional skills required by the opera industry,

resulting in employability challenges. In this context, curriculum development was deemed a fundamental tool to equip VA graduates with the necessary skills required by employers. In addition, music entrepreneurship skills, marketing skills, and administrative skills play a significant role in putting students in a better position to succeed in the contemporary workplace (Van Zuilenburg 2012).

Research Questions

For the study, the researchers developed specific primary questions that sought answers that would clarify the ongoing crisis:

1. Why do VA graduates find it difficult to find employment after their studies?
2. What are the significant causes of unemployment for VA graduates within the industry?
3. Are there any other factors that contribute to the scarcity of employment for VA graduates in general?
4. Is there a link between VA students' skills and those required by the performing arts industry?
5. What are workable solutions that could contribute towards promoting employment for VA students?

To answer these questions, the sub-aims of the study were limited to the following three that were deemed significant:

1. To review the relevance of the VA curriculum of TUT regarding employment requirements for its graduates.
2. To conduct and explore the current levels of the employment challenges facing VA graduates.
3. To identify and describe some possible solutions that could promote the employment of VA students in South Africa.

Methodology

Research Paradigm and Sampling

A qualitative research method was adopted whereby a case study research design was employed to achieve the set goal. The case study aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of and essential information about the employability challenges facing VA graduates in South Africa. A non-probability sampling design was adopted using purposive sampling to select VA graduates, students, employers, and lecturers. The purposive sampling design was deemed more convenient for many participants and for the researchers (Merriam 2009). The sample was drawn from three South African provinces, namely, Gauteng, Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. These provinces were chosen because they promote the performing arts, especially opera, more strongly than other provinces and because of the availability of companies that offer sustainable employment and opportunities for singers and opera graduates. Gauteng was both suitable and convenient for the participants and researchers regarding costs as the

researchers reside in Pretoria, and most of the VA alumni who graduated from TUT reside in the province. Many VA students were known to the researchers, making the students easy to access. Table 1 represents the number of participants of each kind selected for the study.

Table 1: Participants in the study

Level	Number selected	Percentage of population
Alumni (graduates)	15	25%
Students (first to fourth year)	30	50%
Employers	5	8%
Lecturers	10	17%

Data Collection and Data Quality

As part of the data collection for the case study, in-depth, individual interviews were conducted using the semi-structured interview approach. The semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to discuss the responses with the interviewees (Merriam 2009). During the interviews, the researchers used audio recordings and made notes on a notepad that were later transcribed and were kept safe. Each interview lasted approximately 40 to 50 minutes. Furthermore, a review of scholarly writings, such as articles, theses and other relevant documents, was deemed necessary to provide trustworthy findings.

To preserve data quality in the case study, the researchers adopted a triangulation approach. The triangulation is important to ensure that the case study data is validated and cross-examined, duly eliminating criticism and debate about bias, singularity and subjective observatory research.

Data Analysis

In the study, narrative data analysis and thematic data analysis were employed to analyse the selected participants' interviews. These methods assisted the researchers when analysing the participants' experiences and meaningfully interpreting the questions posed to the participants. Six significant steps are crucial in thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 88), namely:

- familiarising oneself with the data;
- generating initial codes;
- searching for themes;
- reviewing the themes;
- redefining and naming the themes; and
- producing the report.

The thematic analysis helped the researchers yield and generate findings that transform raw data into new knowledge. The thematic analysis was crucial because it helped the researchers derive precise findings and interpret and present the study findings in concrete and well-developed themes.

Ethical Clearance

Letters of consent were obtained from the study participants and they were informed about the nature and purpose of the study. Signed informed consent was obtained from the study participants and they were assured that their privacy, anonymity and confidentiality would be honoured. Finally, the participants all participated voluntarily.

Results/Findings

Introductory Remarks

Perhaps it is prudent to foreground this section by identifying some of South Africa's HEIs that cater to performing arts disciplines and VA in particular. These include: the University of Cape Town's College of Music; the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Department of Music; the University of South Africa's Music Examinations Directorate; the University of Northwest's Potchefstroom Campus; the University of Pretoria's Musaion; and TUT's VA section, to name a few. These HEIs produce a substantial number of performing arts graduates annually. Where are the performing arts graduates absorbed, considering the present critical unemployment rate in South Africa?

The study findings reveal common themes that emerged from the four basic groups, namely, graduates, students, employers and lecturers. These findings were supplemented by scholarly literary writings. The findings were divided into seven significant sections, namely: (1) diminished performing arts platforms or industry; (2) South African Department of Basic Education's (DBE) non-recognition of performing arts graduates; (3) VA graduates battling to bridge from university to industry; (4) VA graduates' perspective; (5) students' expectations and industry expectations; (6) industry or employers' perspective; and (7) performing arts lecturers' perspective. The findings addressed the study questions, while the sub-aims were developed according to the literature gathered in the study.

Diminished Performing Arts Platforms or Industry

It is generally accepted that one of the factors contributing to the unemployment crisis is the profound change that occurred in the performing arts landscape during the 1990s. Before the advent of a democratic South Africa in 1994, the apartheid government used four provincial arts councils to govern the arts, namely: the Natal Provincial Arts Council (NAPAC); the Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal (PACT); the Performing Arts Council of the Orange Free State (PACOFs); and the Cape Performing Arts Board (CAPAB). With the dissolution and restructuring of the performing arts

councils after apartheid, the situation changed for arts performers, particularly for vocal artists. Opportunities for gainful employment and financial security for performers gradually became limited. In addition, the vacuum created by the closing of council-managed companies meant that HEIs that catered for performing arts disciplines no longer had repositories for their graduates.

DBE's Non-Recognition of Performing Arts Graduates

The study also found that further extenuating circumstances that perpetuate the unemployment of VA graduates are that the DBE does not recognise these graduates as qualified practitioners for teaching in schools. The findings further demonstrated that VA graduates from TUT, who hold National Diplomas and Baccalaureus of Technology Degrees in Vocal Pedagogy, are always persuaded to enrol for the bridging Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course offered by the University of South Africa and University of Pretoria, among others. This additional course requires the graduates to complete an extra year. Students also have to add Higher Diploma in Education (HDE) courses to graduate with a Bachelor of Music (BMus) in Education when graduating from comprehensive universities such as the University of Cape Town's College of Music. A BMus alone does not qualify a graduate to be recognised as a qualified teacher or educator in the DBE system. These are some of the constraints that add to the difficulties that South African performing arts graduates face regarding their employability.

The only other avenue for these graduates, albeit minimal, could be if they pursue postgraduate studies such as master's and doctorates, so that they could be found employable at universities as lecturers. That obviously would take several years for them to reach that level. Again, it is not a given guarantee that they all will find employment. The scenario has become very gloomy given the present economic crisis in South Africa.

VA Graduates Battling to Bridge from University to Industry

Like many other graduates from diverse disciplines, VA graduates battle to transition from university to the workplace. Preliminary postulations reveal that some scholars noticed that graduates still battle to make a solid move from university to the industry of their profession (Carbonel, Sannadan and Venus 2015; Wright et al. 2008). Undoubtedly, the relevance of the skills packaged into the curriculum plays a significant role (Abbing 2019; Brown 2003). So, the challenges experienced by Vocal Art graduates are skills related. In other words, the skills they generally acquire presently need to be enhanced with additional identifiable skills informed by industry requirements.

In the South African context, additional skills are perceived as a significant aspect that makes a performer more competitive in the performing arts industry (Yende 2017). These essential additional skills are business (entrepreneurial) skills, marketing skills,

and administrative skills, among others. It should be imperative that university performing arts curricula be constantly revised or transformed to align with changing industry demands.

VA Graduates' Perspective

The majority of VA graduates believe that some basic academic attributes have to be included in the curriculum for graduates to be considered for the workplace. Almost invariably, the graduates echo that these basic academic attributes or skills are business (entrepreneurial) skills, marketing skills, and administrative skills. A few VA graduates are employed in the few opera organisations around the country, mostly in Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng.

The findings also revealed a dire crisis scenario where VA graduates were working in odd places rather than those they are qualified for, just to make ends meet. Many of them were found working in retail stores or supermarkets as cashiers or in restaurants as waitrons. The responsibility for employment opportunities for graduates should also rest in the curriculum that the university offers. One of the alumni made the following observation:

When I was a performing arts student, we used to have master classes and we performed often at the State Theatre. The department used to invite experts to conduct master classes. As the years went by, things started to change. Much as the international experts are still being invited to conduct much-valued master classes, we are continuing to graduate into a vacuum.

The VA programme continues to produce high-quality singers. However, employment opportunities continue to be scarce, hence this statement of concern from one of the graduates:

Employment is a serious issue for us as graduates because we battle to get employment. The employers are well pleased with the basic skills that we have, such as voice, sight-reading and acting, but they require more than that. It is hard in the industry of arts if you do not possess extra attributes such as business skills that would entice the employers.

Another participant added:

It is difficult to be a successful performer having only the skills that are taught by the university. The performing arts industry expects more than what we have from the university.

Most graduates have found it difficult to bridge from university to the workplace, and they are very frustrated. This shows that the basic attributes that the HEIs offer are not sufficient to make students employable.

Students' Expectations and Industry Expectations

It was remarkable that both the current students and those who had graduated expressed the same view that HEIs should assist students with workplace placement during their formative study years. Thereafter, the HEIs should liaise with potentially relevant industries to absorb the graduates. Thus, VA students expect HEIs to assist them with employment. One frustrated graduate said:

The university should also assist us to find employment because we were part of the university and graduated there.

Other students agreed that the HEI's role is to ensure that it provides a solid bridge from university to industry by ensuring that the students have the attributes that employers seek. This was strongly confirmed by one of the participants saying:

My role as a student is to make sure that I possess as much as possible of the experience and the skills that are needed in the industry.

Another participant said:

I thought my primary role as a graduate was to complete my qualification and that I had all the features required in the theatre.

These young adults are talking about what vocational training institutions call work-integrated learning (WIL), whereby HEIs liaise with relevant industries in the vicinity to offer the students hands-on practical training while they study. Thus, the students gain industry experience earlier, and it is easier for that industry to absorb some of the students as full-time or permanent employees.

Industry/Employers' Perspective

The following are the summarised findings from the VA employers or classical singing industry. It is prudent to mention that the term "employer" or "the singing industry" refers to opera companies that employ opera singers full-time and part-time. Overall, employers were not satisfied with the skills level of the graduates. However, employers appreciate the few skills they use, such as professional singing of opera soli and chorus. Employers contend that these basic skills did not add more value to the industry because the skills are regarded as key performance skills of any performer and nothing more. The industry employers advocate for additional skills essential for the performing arts industry, such as business (entrepreneurial) skills, marketing skills, administrative skills, business enterprises, and workplace experience.

The employers recommended that the VA curriculum be revised to correspond with the demands of the VA industry. The employers also recommended that the students work hard while they study, prepare themselves for the industry, and not wait for the

university to market them. Employers stated that students should not wait for the HEI to provide employment for them. One of the employers said:

Some of the challenges that we come across as employers include a lack of appropriate additional skills such as entrepreneurship and administration skills from these graduates. The prevailing truth it is that the performing arts industry does not look only at qualifications but requires some business and administrative skills too.

Another employer highlighted:

As a company, we are satisfied with the level of basic skills that the TUT Vocal Art section equip graduates with, but we also want graduates who have what the company is looking for. In addition, the basic skills do not add any value to the company if an individual does not have the additional attributes that can promote the company rather than just mere qualifications.

One participant employer commented:

We need skilled artists, people who possess the quality of additional skills like directing opera, business skills and administrative skills rather than a certificate.

Based on the above responses, employers are aware that graduates possess a qualification with the basic skills that make an individual a performer. However, basic skills such as singing, acting, and sight-reading are not enough for the industry. The skills are necessary but not sufficient.

The industry expects all graduates to possess the qualities required for the workplace and to adapt quickly to the performing arts industry. In addition, employers expect graduates to work independently and adjust to changes within the performing arts industry.

Lecturers' Perspective

While the lecturers concede that they should employ or adopt the WIL programme, they argue that they have lately found it not easy or possible to embark upon it. The main reason is that the VA industry has thinned out due to the post-apartheid closure of performing arts avenues such as the former four performing arts councils. A few theatres are left to absorb the graduates, namely, the Artscape Theatre Centre in Cape Town, the Soweto Theatre, the Johannesburg Civic Theatre (now the Joburg Theatre), and the Pretoria State Theatre (now the South African State Theatre). Nonetheless, over the years, universities have staged various productions in terms of genre, style and setting, thereby receiving positive reviews and feedback. In these productions, the current students have the opportunity to hone their performance and artistic skills in an environment similar to the “real world” of opera and stage production at large. This exposure is more visible when several VA alumni shine on the international stage, receiving positive reviews and better performance prospects. These universities

continuously engage with the few available platforms to give the students opportunities to audition for prominent productions locally and internationally.

It is significant to note that some South African HEIs have begun to embark on curriculum restructuring, and VA programmes are part of the process. These institutions are exploring possible solutions to the conundrum of the employability of VA graduates. This process of reviewing the curriculum is presently under way. The new curriculum is structured so that performing arts students will have a wider choice of subjects or modules that will cater for wider employment opportunities. In addition, the new curriculum modules will serve to ground the understanding of a wider spectrum of performing arts. Henceforth, students will be given the grounding in professional business practices encompassing marketing, budgeting and finance, which are the fundamental skills required to create a creative enterprise within the performing arts industries (Lewis 2018). Hereafter, VA studies will be more pragmatic and less literature and theory-oriented.

Therefore, despite the limited opportunities available for VA students in South Africa today, the lecturers are doing their utmost to empower students.

Data Acquired According to the Developed Aims Using Existing Literature

Relevance of the VA Curriculum of TUT Regarding Employment Requirements for Graduates

Yende (2017) is convinced that the VA curriculum is no longer relevant and adequate to address the needs of the VA industry and that the curriculum makes it difficult for singers to be employable. Hence, curriculum transformation is proposed to align the South African HEIs with the needs of the employers (Yende 2021). Therefore, the quality of employment opportunities for Vocal Art graduates rests on the revised curriculum. A recent study by Yende (2021, 137) revealed that TUT has revised the old curriculum that was no longer in line with the needs of the industry. The new curriculum has programmes with strong entrepreneurship modules for Vocal Art students.

Current Levels of the Employment Challenges Facing VA Graduates

The current level of unemployment for VA graduates is high in South Africa (Mugovhani 2017; Spies 2015). One should not overlook that opera companies are deteriorating, leading to the high unemployment of opera singers. Florea (2014) highlights that opera theatres globally experience challenges such as management, financial, and governance challenges. Theatres have downsized, leading to increased unemployment. These challenges are being experienced worldwide by opera theatres, and the downsizing severely threatens opera performers' careers (Mitchell 2014).

The study by Bennett (2012) revealed that “careers in music are much more than a job: successful musicians are those who follow their passion and develop their strengths and interests to forge sustainable careers”. Following Bennett’s statement, it is evident that

the industry requires graduates to be passionate and more perseverant and have a good work ethic to clinch the few jobs available.

Possible Solutions That Could Contribute to Promoting the Employment of VA Graduates

Yende (2017) highlights the problems of the unavailability of employment opportunities for VA graduates and inadequate curricula. A possible solution for students to be successful in the industry is to change students' perceptions and expectations regarding the university (Perkins 2012). These ongoing challenges experienced by VA graduates could be mitigated by the graduates if they stop waiting for the industry to call them for auditions and create opportunities for themselves by hosting events, performing at schools, stadiums, and weddings, among others (Yende 2017). This initiative would close the gap created by inadequate curricula and the closure of opera companies in the country. TUT's VA section should develop an exchange programme to expose their graduates to work in the performing arts. This suggestion for an exchange programme was echoed by Van Zuilenburg (2012), who states that "tertiary music departments owe it to their students to expose them to entrepreneurship in the arts to prepare them properly for life as professional musicians".

Discussion

The challenges experienced by Vocal Art graduates are linked to TUT's VA curriculum that does not equip them with the requisite skills for the performing arts industry. Skills marked as vital in the performing arts industry are the capacity to think creatively, strategically, analytically, and reflectively, as well as showing confidence in one's abilities, the ability to collaborate, to maintain well-developed communication skills, and an understanding of the current artistic context (Kavanagh and Drennan 2008; Ogude, Nel and Oosthuizen 2005; Pollard and Wilson 2013). This trajectory of skills inclusion is an essential consideration in the performing arts curricula at university (Pollard and Wilson 2013). The skills obtained at university do not automatically equip graduates with the skills valued by the labour market. Indeed, graduates are expected to make a noteworthy contribution in the workplace and take possession of their careers, rather than merely possessing basic singing skills (Berry 2009; Davies 2000; Jorgensen 2004; Lowden et al. 2011).

The bottom line is that basic skills such as singing, acting, and sight-reading are not enough for the performing arts industry. The skills are necessary, but not sufficient. Performing arts is a dynamic field that must have performers who are disciplined and continually adapt to new challenges in the theatre and other industries (Leibbrandt et al. 2010; Mtero 2012; Olorundare and Kayode 2014; Pollard and Wilson 2013).

Companies look for self-motivated graduates who are able to take on challenges with minimal direction (Freudenberg, Brimble and Cameron 2011, 83). It is important that Vocal Art graduates should exit university with transferable skills that will enable them

to be employable and marketable in the performing arts industry. Transferable skills are skills and abilities that are relevant and useful across various social and professional areas (NRC 2013).

Indeed, the VA industry appreciates key performance skills such as singing. However, graduates' qualifications should include requisite experience and business knowledge to supplement their VA practical skills (Moleke 2010, 15). The importance to industry of business and entrepreneurship skills to supplement the graduates' practical skills cannot be overemphasised.

From the researchers' interviews, it was found that students have high expectations from HEIs in terms of marketing them for employment. On the other hand, employers expect students to be well prepared for the labour market (Nilsson and Ripmeester 2016; West 2000; Wilton 2014).

Therefore, it should be imperative for university curricula to be constantly revisited and revised to align accordingly with changing employment environments or industry demands (Griesel and Parker 2009). This curriculum revision would assist to successfully bridge the gap from university to the work environment.

Thus, the study has confirmed that many VA graduates battle to find employment due to various challenges arising from their lack of additional skills. Their lack of skills is a significant problem since employers seek more of those additional skills. One should not overlook that this additional skills problem is aggravated by the peculiar circumstances of South Africa's stagnant economic landscape and the rapid pace of change in the wider global economic arena.

It is significant to acknowledge that the VA industry is highly competitive, given that there is a scarcity of employment opportunities within the performing arts industry in general. However, the contribution of VA programmes at South African HEIs cannot be underestimated, as the institutions continue to provide many talented singers who are recognised by the world.

Despite the gloomy picture portrayed by the interviews with some stakeholders of this art form, South African HEIs' VA programmes are recognised worldwide for the quality of professional singing graduates produced and the graduates' numerous achievements locally and abroad.

The VA graduates' achievements are greatly attributable to the calibre of the teaching staff of VA programmes in the various HEIs in South Africa. As a result, the teaching staff are world-renowned, some as performers of international repute and others as community project leaders in VA around the country.

Conclusion

The study concludes that today's VA graduates must enhance their academic acquisitions (both theory and practical) with extra skills. The study established that due to the absence of proper skills, many VA graduates are forced to work in fields other than the one for which they are qualified. Part of their reason for doing so is to assist them in covering expenses they incur during their studies.

The absence of additional entrepreneurial and administrative skills deserves serious attention because lack of such skills among VA graduates results in inadequate requirements for employment. Having said that, it is nonetheless gratifying to note that the curriculum is undergoing restructuring and transformation because the current curriculum no longer corresponds to the demands of the performing arts industry. The new curriculum will include the requisite additional entrepreneurial and administrative skills.

In other words, it is no longer the physical well-being, technical training, dramatic skills, musicality, scriptwriting, and choreography that are the only crucial requirements in the performing arts industry. The graduates require additional entrepreneurial and administrative skills over and above their basic arts skills.

Based on the study results and the analysis thereof, it can be concluded that the lack of entrepreneurial and administration skills in the training of VA graduates at TUT contributes towards preventing their entry into the labour market. Employers look beyond the basic skills delivered by qualifications and expect additional skills from prospective employees. Therefore, there should be increased student exposure to the work environment. This exposure could easily be achieved by optimising work-integrated learning (one of the recognised learning strategies of vocational HEIs). This necessity for the work-integrated learning strategy was also corroborated by the students in their responses to the interviews conducted by this study.

Upon reflection on the study results, it is recommended that the performing arts industry initiates development programmes whereby VA graduates are trained and provided with the requisite entrepreneurial and administrative skills and are given opportunities to gain the experience that employers seek. In addition, the development programmes will create opportunities for students to engage with industry experts. The students also suggested that teaching and learning in the VA programme should include at least two guest lectures by industry experts in the teaching calendar per semester.

The current employability of VA graduates is uncertain. However, there is light at the end of the employment tunnel, particularly when the new curriculum strategy to include entrepreneurial and administrative skills is instituted.

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