

QUALITY TEACHING IN A MANAGERIALIST SETTING: HIGHER EDUCATION CHALLENGES IN AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

Australian universities face increased challenges in a global higher education marketplace. They have responded to this competitive environment by introducing greater efficiency and accountability measures. One key measure is the quality of teaching and in particular, the delivery of student-centred teaching. However, the reforms have changed the working lives of academic teachers who now have greater reporting and administrative responsibilities with less sense of collegiality in the sector. In these circumstances, it is not clear that teaching staff will share the same perceptions of quality teaching as their institutions expect. This paper examines the utility of role theory and learning organization theory as part of a project which will examine the ways in which implicit knowledge can be made explicit and shared in the organization as part of academic teachers' roles. The paper hypothesizes that when academics share their perceptions of good teaching, universities will benefit from a coherent set of quality teaching indicators which are aligned with their organizational cultures.

1. Introduction

There is a relationship between the quality of teaching and student learning outcomes driven by the fact that high-quality student learning is aided by good teaching practices (Ramsden, 2003, p. 3). The quality teaching and learning nexus is made more complex with the current generation of students, many of whom are time-poor but technologically-savvy and seek more flexible modes of delivery, underpinned by new technologies (McInnis, 1996). This expectation inherently impacts on, and alters, the frame of reference within which teaching staff identify their roles, and how their skills sets match what is described as a paradigm shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred teaching (Postareff and Lindblom-Ylänne, 2008). In a learner-centred teaching model, the teacher is viewed as the facilitator of learning while the student moves from a passive to a more active state.

For staff to be motivated to teach well in a learner-centred system we argue that universities must not only have as their central mission, a commitment to high-quality teaching, but must also demonstrate how they support teaching staff to achieve this. This includes how universities recognize and reward staff successful in supporting quality student learning (Griffiths, 1993) with the same level of respect and status given to quality research (Rice and Austin, 1993). Quality teaching in higher education therefore needs to be considered from two perspectives – its context (the university and its mission related to teaching, as well as its external environment) and its stakeholders (those who experience or undertake teaching and those who undertake the teaching). Getting a shared understanding of what constitutes good teaching practice is a key to consistent quality teaching. Where there is a difference in the perceptions of quality – whether this is from organizational, student or personal perspectives – there is the potential for conflict in the expectations of the teaching role with a consequent impact on the quality of teaching (Watty, 2002). We argue that shared perceptions of quality teaching are challenged by the many diverse forces acting on universities in their modern environment.

This paper reviews the international literature on teaching quality in the context of contemporary higher education focusing on Australia and questions the extent to which individual teaching staff members share their institution's expectations of the academic teaching role. The paper commences with a discussion of the context of higher education in Australia, its political and global pressures. The paper argues that a learning organizational model informed by role theory may provide some guideposts to converting tacit to explicit knowledge in the sharing of understanding of what constitutes good teaching.

2. The contemporary higher education context

The Australian higher education sector comprises 37 public universities and two private universities, and currently accounts for the third greatest portion of the nation's Gross Domestic Product (DEWWR, 2010). The universities in the sector have been broadly categorized, on the basis of how they profile and position themselves, as: the

Group of Eight (the eight oldest universities in Australia established before the 1950s and with a research-intensive focus); the Innovative Research Universities (seven universities established during the 1960s and 1970s with a targeted research focus); the Australian Technology Network (five universities established during the 1980s previously established as institutes of technology); the Regional Universities (seven universities established between the 1950s and the 1990s based in regional or rural centres); and a loose alignment of what had been identified as the New Generation Universities (ten universities established in the 1990s from the amalgamations of colleges of advanced education) (Universities Australia, 2009). The Australian institutions that identify themselves, and recognize each other, as dual sector universities are: Charles Darwin University in the Northern Territory, Swinburne University of Technology, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, the University of Ballarat and Victoria University in Victoria. The main characteristics defining dual sector universities are that they have substantial student load in both vocational education and higher education, and they undertake substantial research and award research doctorates (Moodie, 2009, p. 1).

The landscape of higher education in Australia has undergone significant change in recent times as 'knowledge has come to be identified as the most vital resource of contemporary societies' (Meek, 2009, p. 1). The changes evidenced by an expansion in provision, both in the number of students and the number of providers of higher education; increased diversity in student cohorts; the need to increasingly differentiate from, and between, higher education providers; and the increasing expectations from society of the place of higher education, have had an impact on work roles within the sector (Meek, 2009). Meek (2009, pp. 1-2) identifies three core areas where changes in higher education are most pervasive: the need for outcomes that are relevant and directly impact everyday life; the internationalization of higher education in the broadest sense; and the professionalization of managers in higher education to enable effective responses to the rapidly changing external environment.

At the same time, these market driven changes with their focus on value and accountability have placed pressure to improve the quality of the student experience. The challenge of aligning teaching excellence, institutional and system benchmarks for excellence is heightened, as universities are required to operate in a customer-focused and business-orientated sector that is competitive in a global marketplace accountable to governments and its stakeholders.

3. Competition and ranking in the Higher Education Sector

Over the past 20 years, the many changes in Australian higher education have reflected an international trend for increased accountability. The competitive drive of universities has been seen as a prominent feature of organizational endeavour in the sector. The focus in terms of its economic contribution has been a theme in the evolution of change in the sector as Wood and Meek observed:

'Since the second half of the 1990s, there has been little debate about what are or should be the objectives and priorities of the nation's universities. Rather the steering of higher education has been given over to the market and the outcomes of market competition.' (Wood and Meek, 2002, pp. 22-23)

There is a general view that universities have not resisted the market push (Thornton, 2005) and that entrepreneurial activity has flourished as they compete to generate income to compensate for government funding shortfalls. Key to this competition has been the relationship between high quality research and education with success in globalized knowledge economies. This has been recognized by successive Australian governments as critical to the long-term sustainability and growth of the local economy (Boulton and Lucas, 2008). The strategy has focused universities on self-sustainability as they move to recoup their costs through student fees and commercial activities. Until recently, the Australian tertiary education sector operated in an environment of under-spending with public investment of 0.8% of GDP, compared to other OECD countries of 1.0%, which placed Australia 25th in a ranking of 29 OECD countries (Marginson, 2009).

The Rudd Government's Bradley Review (Bradley *et al.*, 2008) was commissioned to inform its 'education revolution' agenda. The Review findings were released in December 2008 with a persuasive message to increase public investment in education to ensure that Australia is competitive internationally whilst maintaining its quality reputation. The report advised that the sector required significant and costly structural change to address three broad issues: a national tertiary education framework; being competitive in the higher education system internationally; and long-term competitive positioning. The latter two issues are expressions suited to the notion of the continued business orientation of tertiary education and the report provided descriptions of 'business like' terminology such as resources, good governance, leadership and management. Of the Report's 46 wide-ranging recommendations, two are of specific interest to this paper. Recommendations 19 and 20 (Bradley *et al.*, 2008) relate to the establishment of a national framework and regulatory body for higher education accreditation, quality assurance and regulation with features including quality audits based on the institution's academic standards and the means by which they are set, monitored and maintained; and the reporting by a national regulatory body on the quality, effectiveness and efficiency (Bradley *et al.*, 2008) of higher education providers.

The quality of the student experience has been identified as a key indicator in the internal self-review and external audit processes and will be within the purview of the newly evolving Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA), which is a core component of the Government's response to the Bradley Review as was expressed by the Deputy Prime Minister: 'the Rudd Government has put quality teaching and learning at the forefront of the Education Revolution, and in higher education this will include a comprehensive new approach to quality assurance' (Gillard, 2009). Underpinning the work of TEQSA will be objective and comparative benchmarks

for quality teaching, developed with universities, which will form the basis of future audits and performance based funding. Comparative measures and assessment against criteria in higher education are by no means new phenomena – locally, nationally or internationally. There is a range of frameworks within many institutions that provide for student feedback such as student evaluation of teaching, and the rewarding of excellence – for example teaching excellence awards; and promotion for academic staff. For each of these, criteria are established which generally link to those established by external bodies such as the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS – the component of the Australian Graduate Survey, AGS) and the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) annual survey which is used by Graduate Careers Australia (GCA) to gather information from graduates of Australian universities. Teaching quality framework indicators are not unique to Australia. They are important internationally given the global influences on tertiary education and the movement of students into and out of education across institutions, disciplines and countries. The data is collated and available publicly and is regularly used for benchmarking as quality teaching indicators across universities.

In recent times, many Australian universities have documented a range of indicators of quality teaching and learning that resonate within their specific environment. Each has taken a unique approach to defining and describing these, for example, nine ‘guiding principles’ (University of Melbourne) (James and Baldwin, 2002); four ‘dimensions’ and six ‘contextual elements’ (Queensland University of Technology) (Gardiner, 2004); and eight ‘capabilities’ and ‘clarifying elements’ (Victoria University) (Victoria University, 2005).

There are also other measures utilized to rank one higher education institution over another in Australia. Such examples include the (now redundant), Australian Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (ALTPF) initiative administered by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) against which publicly funded Australian universities were measured against a range of criteria and ranked. Within the amalgam of data sources underpinning this ranking were a set of quality indicators including student satisfaction responses following completion of their program of study; student progression rates including into higher degree studies; and graduate employment outcomes. The ranking provided not only significant reputational outcomes but also attracted rewards of substantial funding for the highest ranked universities. Another key ranking system of Universities internationally uses measures of performance to reinforce the international competitiveness of the sector with the Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU) indicator being regarded as the most globally influential ranking (Marginson and van der Wende, 2007). Rankings such as these bring boldly into public scrutiny comparative data for analysis and decision making by a number of parties, including current and prospective students. One key issue that deserves exploration is the role of academic teachers in delivering success on these indicators, and whether the indicators are perceived as important by these teachers.

4. The role of teachers in higher education in the competitive environment

The core activities and distinguishing characteristics of universities are the teaching and research activities undertaken by academic staff. These activities are now performed in competition with other universities. Competition for students is the primary driver for government funding and student fees. Competitive funding programs exist for both teaching and research programs. The de-regulation of the higher education sector has the potential to further escalate competition for students as the Australian government's reforms remove caps on enrolments from 2012. At the same time, there is increased demand to engage with the community, schools and businesses; and to operate with flexibility and diversity within university charters as these various perspectives have emerged and not all of these demands and pressures are aligned to any particular coherent strategy.

The competitive environment is fuelled with inconsistencies. For instance, Marginson (2005) highlighted the 'tension between diversity of Australian universities institutional missions at home and the claims of one national *brand* in the global marketplace' (p. 13). Hence, there is a combination of competition and convergence in how individual universities address their missions. The place of quality teaching indicators in this scenario is also one where there is active benchmarking which could arguably lead to convergence.

A body of theory has been built on the understanding that the contexts of teaching influence the manner students learn (Ramsden *et al.*, 2007, p. 141). The authors found that variations in how academics approached their teaching were based on the way they experienced the context of teaching. For instance, if class sizes were not large, academics reported using approaches aimed at fostering students' understanding of the topic. Large class sizes led academics to teacher-centred approaches, which relied on transmitting information rather than checking student understanding. Further, academics reported using greater student-focused techniques when they had greater control over the content being taught, when they perceived greater organizational support, when they had an appropriate academic workload and when they perceived the students had the requisite skills and abilities for effective learning. Building on this understanding, it is possible to name some of the factors that teachers recognize as influencing their teaching approaches in a qualitatively different way. Another salient contextual factor, which influences the manner in which academics teach is the leadership style in academic departments. More collaborative and transformational forms of leadership in departments were identified to lead to more student-focused approaches, whilst less collaborative forms resulted in teacher-focused forms of teaching (Martin *et al.*, 2003).

5. The challenges of shared perspectives of good teaching

Australian Government reforms in the higher education sector have led to a greater business focus in the management of universities with a preference for private sector management principles, driven by managerialism, commercialization and consumerism.

Managerialism has been associated with economic rationalism, corporatization of the public sector, state intervention in university management, and greater focus on work productivity and market orientations, particularly as education is now largely seen as a commodity (Taylor, 1999). Indeed, more recently O'Meara and Petzall observed that the sector has completely shifted to operate more as private sector organizations:

'In response to continued economic rationalist pressures, universities have been marketised, unified, privatised and corporatised. The internal culture has also changed and is now similar to that of the private sector, with education as the trading commodity.' (O'Meara and Petzall, 2007, p. 71)

The overt impact on academic staff engaged in teaching in the 'corporatized' university has been a fundamental change in the way in which they are able to engage in decision making and collegial activity to the point that they have been described as 'subordinated to the mission, marketing and strategic developments of the institution and its leaders' (Marginson and Considine, 2000, p. 5). The result has been an increased focus on efficiency and measurement (Solondz, 1995). This highly competitive world has necessarily impacted on university culture and values, which have been translated into teaching and research outcomes. As Newman *et al.* (2004, p. 4) lamented: 'the search for truth is rivalled by a search for revenues'. The effect of these changes on academics has been documented in the research literature and is briefly canvassed below in terms of its potential impact on academics and their teaching.

Casual Academic Teaching Staff

The increasing use of casual, short-term academic staff, hired to lecture or tutor on an as-needs basis, has been referred to as an academic underclass (Altbach, 2002) or even as an ivory basement (Eveline, 2004). This cost effective workforce is most usually required to meet fluctuations in student enrolments at short notice. Control of teaching quality can clearly be compromised with a changing cohort of casual academics teaching subjects in which they have no control over the content or sometimes even the manner of delivery of teaching. Solondz (1995) argues that their increasing presence in Australian universities places pressure on permanently employed teaching staff that has a heightened sense of job insecurity.

Work intensification

Australian academics now are said to be working harder and longer than ever before (Harman, 2003). At the same time, they are more highly qualified, less satisfied, less committed and less involved with their institutions (Bellamy *et al.*, 2003; Ferrer and Van Gramberg, 2009; Harman, 2003; Lacy and Sheehan, 1997; Winter and Sarros, 2002; Winter *et al.*, 2000). Taylor (2008) noted that work intensification for academics has led to less time for autonomy and academic freedom. Academics have also been reported to spend more time on non-core activities, including ensuring compliance with greater reporting requirements and administrative functions (McInnes, 1998). For

instance, an early study by Martin (1999) reported that 80% of non-leader academics believed that there were too many accountability measures; and 72% of non-leaders believed that there was a clear lack of vision in their institutions.

Increased student numbers

The greater focus on student intake has had a significant effect on academics. Student/staff ratios have risen over the years and there has been a concomitant increase in international students attending Australian universities. The result, using the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) 2005 data reported by Niland (2008), indicates that 25% of students enrolled in Australian universities are international students. There are some universities with nearly 50% of their student population being international students. These large numbers of full fee-paying students have not been sought after as a strategy to increase diversity or idea production in universities but rather to generate extra revenue (Eveline, 2004). Taken together, increased domestic student numbers and increased international students have placed greater pressure on academics (Karmel, 2000). This adds to academics' already increasing workloads, placing greater teaching burdens on them along with the continued pressure to research and publish.

Quality of life for academics

Martin (1999) found that the changes in higher education had a profound effect on academics' quality of life. She found that university environments had contributed to a lack of consultation, too much accountability, lack of vision and lack of value for the people and their worth. Many of these have led to a sense of disempowerment, low morale and lack of trust within universities. Notably, the lack of consultation goes against the grain of collegiality. This finding was supported more recently by Weller and Van Gramberg (2007) in a study of Australia's 37 public universities where over the years 1997-2006 there had been a systemic decline in academics' participation in organizational change and a shift towards unilateral decision making by higher education managers.

In more general terms, managerialism has been found elsewhere to have a significant impact on employees working lives. Rees (1995a) noted that it produces increased stress and lack of morale from the greater pressures and increased accountabilities and concluded that managerialism breeds a bullying culture in which managers use control strategies in which there is little tolerance for troublemakers or those with different views (Rees, 1995b). In effect, the impact of managerialism on academics marks a dramatic shift from a culture reputedly built on consultation, intellectualism and freedom of ideas to one of management control (Taylor, 1999). One consequence of management driven change in universities is the effect on perceived organizational support. Organizational support theory (OST) as developed by Eisenberger *et al.* (1986) suggests that a lack of support will lead to lack of commitment from employees whereas strongly perceived organizational support has been found to lead to committed

and motivated employees (Bayona-Saez *et al.*, 2009; Ferrer and Van Gramberg, 2009; Winter and Sarros, 2002). Support from universities is widely perceived as being low with many academics believing there is a lack of support, loyalty and commitment to them from their universities (Winter and Sarros 2002). A recent study by Ferrer (Ferrer and Van Gramberg, 2009) found that more than half of all surveyed business academics from 37 public Australian universities reported being detached from their organization.

6. Towards a shared understanding of perceptions of good teaching

The need to address the mandate to provide a high quality educational experience for students through the advancement of quality learning and teaching is largely uncontested. Equally, the relationship between the quality of teaching and high-quality learning in the context within which higher education operates is well established (Entwistle and Walker, 2002; Entwistle and Peterson, 2004; Forgasz and Leder, 2006; Kember and Kwan, 2000). The emergent challenge for teaching staff in this context is the extent to which they are, or feel able to, participate in decisions that affect them; and the extent to which those decisions impact on the teaching environment and the practice of collegiality (Thornton, 2005). In turn this may have an effect on how teachers in higher education construct their own quality teaching.

Clearly, within the contemporary university environment, defining and describing what constitutes quality teaching is contentious. Various stakeholder groups have an interest in quality (Marginson and Considine, 2000). The role of academic staff is recognised as critical in determining the ultimate performance of an institution at: national level (policy and structural changes impacting on all universities; and quality agencies); organizational level (within universities) and individual level (teaching staff and students) but not all share the same understanding. This has the potential for conflict or ambiguity in the teaching role (Watty, 2002). There is a need to identify the variety of views from the perspective of academic teachers in higher education and their managers regarding quality teaching indicators, drivers and constraints. We believe that role theory and the application of the principles of learning organizations can be used to understand better how to bring together the perceptions of quality teaching of academics and their institutions in the current Australian higher education context.

Role Theory

Role theory can be described as a frame of reference for examining the competing viewpoints of individuals and groups conceptualized by Kahn *et al.* (1964) to understand the behaviour of individuals within organizations. Role theory encompasses the notion of role conflict, which is a lack of congruence of expectations; and role ambiguity, or lack of clarity of expectations (Kahn *et al.*, 1964). In essence, the theory seeks to explain 'patterned forms of behaviour, social positions, specialization and division of labor as well as the process by which members communicate, learn and are socialised' (Biddle

and Thomas, 1966, p. 3). The role theory model identifies the interpersonal process between 'the person being sent role expectations and those sending the expectations' (Chrispeels, 2004, p. 123). This theory views the organization as a system of roles, with the 'role set' of a particular position comprising a series of role episodes, which include role sending, role receiving, role expectations, and role behaviour (Kahn *et al.*, 1964). Research by Van Sell *et al.* (1981) identified that individuals regularly take on roles that may conflict with their values or take on multiple roles that potentially conflict.

The gap between teachers' perceptions of quality teaching and those held by the institution in policies and practices may be indicative of an institution that is out of touch with its teaching staff. The congruence of teacher and organizational perceptions within one university will provide an understanding of any 'gap'; and whether there are organizational systems in place which support shared learning as explained below.

The University as a Learning Organization

The ability of the organization to garner and utilize the knowledge of its staff is a hallmark of a learning organization. In turn, the establishment of a learning organization is paramount to the ability of an organization to survive in competitive environments (Eskildsen *et al.*, 1999). There are multiple definitions to describe learning organizations (Collie and Taylor, 2004; Dill, 1999; Senge, 1990) however all identify underpinning principles associated with continuous improvement through continuous learning 'through the creation, collection, and translation of knowledge for improved performance' (Collie and Taylor, 2004, p. 139). Senge (1990) defined a learning organization as one where staff has the freedom to continuously innovate and be creative and that this is fostered by the organization. Within this paradigm, managers do not constrict collective learning, and their staff understands the value of collaboration. Another definition of a learning organization by Pool (2000, p. 374) identifies it as 'an organization where through learning, individuals are continually re-perceiving and reinterpreting their world and their relationship to it. A learning organization incorporates the practice of continually challenging its paradigms and accepted ways of doing things'.

Pedler *et al.* (1997) proffers two perspectives in characterising the learning organization as one that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself and its context, thereby directly linking the individual to the organization. This is supported by Senge's (1990, p. 3) position on the individual and group contribution to the learning organization being 'where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to learn together'.

Organizations learn when tacit knowledge is converted into explicit knowledge. Therefore, organizations first need to tap into what individuals know, and second, must have the right collaborative processes to use and share that knowledge. Watkins

and Marsick (1993, p. 9) argue that 'the learning organization has embedded systems to capture and share learning'. By applying this to universities, the organization must continually adapt its own quality teaching criteria with the emerging criteria used by their teaching academics, which is in turn informed by the teaching context.

Whilst the literature provides a varied landscape as to the orientations of the learning organization, described by Dill (1999, p. 128) as 'eclectic, evaluating ideas and concepts rather than rigorous and grounded research studies' there is a body of empirical research specifically focused on universities as learning organizations (Dill, 1999; Jeffery, 2008; Senge, 2000). Jeffrey's (2008) research into the context of the university sector identified a common theme of intra- and inter-organizational collaboration. Kezar (2006) defined this as requiring the establishment of both formal (for example, cross-disciplinary centres) and informal structures (networking events) to promote a culture of collaboration. An extension to this is inter-organizational collaboration which places value on partnerships between institutions. This latter approach is highly regarded by national funding bodies for both teaching and learning and research initiatives.

We argue that role theory and organizational learning are key elements to finding a common path to quality teaching. Academic teachers who see that their role includes making implicit knowledge explicit through sharing good teaching practices and insights will work well in a learning organization environment that supports them and provides systems to share and disseminate their teaching knowledge. Where these conditions are not in place, or where there are competing and conflicting expectations between academic teachers and their managers, the fundamental need to know what is expected is potentially jeopardized (Van Sell *et al.*, 1981) and as Bauer and Simmons ask: 'what could be more important for the organization, and the individual, than making sure that they are working on the right things?' (2000, p. 4). Indeed, Devlin and Samarawickrema (2010, p. 120) identify that leadership in teaching and learning demonstrated by teachers 'engaging with existing knowledge in the area, self-reflecting on their practice and sharing ideas' will support successful management of the expectations of effective university teaching.

It might be assumed that universities would be readily recognized as learning organizations given their mandate however, there are features of universities that present specific challenges. One influencing factor, as we have discussed in this paper, is the application of business models driven by national education reform policies (Jeffery, 2008). In the view of some researchers (Garvin, 1993; Jeffery, 2008) the challenges are heightened because of inherent features found in university departments such as 'scholarly scepticism, tenure, departmentalisation, competitiveness and weak management' (Jeffery, 2008, p. 5). Many of the features which have been instigated to improve university efficiency and competitiveness such as: the use of casual teaching staff, work intensification, increased student numbers, great accountability measures, and a host of quality teaching indicators, have adversely affected academic teachers in terms of their ability to participate in university decision making, their morale and

commitment. It is likely that the changes are not conducive to fostering student-centred learning. These effects on teaching staff act counter to a shared understanding of what constitutes quality teaching in Australian universities. This paper has argued that a greater understanding of role theory and learning organization theory may provide an avenue to bring together the views of organizations and their academics in a way that a clearer path to quality teaching might be forged.

7. Conclusions

Australian universities face increased challenges in a global higher education marketplace. In response they have implemented a range of cost effective, efficiency measures to bring greater accountability from their academic staff for the range of functions they perform. Key to this is ensuring good teaching quality in a student-centred paradigm. At the same time, teaching staff face a range of changes which reduce their time for thinking and researching and which have driven a compliance agenda in the sector with greater reporting and administrative requirements with less sense of collegiality in the sector. In these circumstances, it is not clear that teaching staff will share the same perceptions of quality teaching as their institutions expect. We argue that the changes are likely to drive teacher-focused teaching rather than student-focused teaching. This paper has canvassed the utility of role theory and learning organization theory as part of a project which will examine the ways in which implicit knowledge can be made explicit and shared in the organization as part of academic teachers' roles. We conclude that through sharing of their perceptions of good teaching, universities will benefit from a coherent set of quality teaching indicators which are aligned with their organizational cultures.

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