

#WeAreInternational
Grants scheme 2022–24
Research

Amplifying voices of international doctoral scholars on intercultural perspective

University of Glasgow and
The University of Edinburgh

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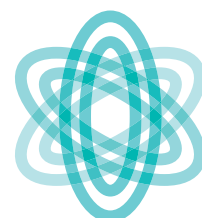
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UKCISA is a membership organisation that works to support international students and the institutions, students' unions and organisations who work closely with them.

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1. Introduction

This research investigates the voices of UK-based international doctoral scholars (IDS). By examining their socialisation process (the formal and informal process supporting scholars' interaction, integration and learning of values, skills, attitudes, knowledge and norms) (Johnson et al., 2017), this study seeks to understand how IDS' potential contributions are channelled through interactions and communication practices and equally, how they can be harnessed (Elliot, 2023).

2. Research aims

This study comprises two phases: a) a systematic review of doctoral theses; and b) creative interviews with a group of doctoral graduates. Increased understanding of IDS experiences are intended to offer distinct insights into how intercultural interactions might serve as means for growth and development – in academic, social, psychological or institutional research environment domains. The same set of research questions guided both phases:

1. What can we learn from examining the intercultural interactions of IDS based in the UK?
2. How can IDS' intercultural interactions within and outwith academia influence their academic, social, psychological and environmental development?

3. Motivations for research and background information

IDS constitute 41% of the UK's doctoral population (HESA, 2022). Compared to numerous studies that explore international student experience, specific studies on IDS are less common. Literature suggests that while doctoral scholars in general encounter a multiplicity of challenges, there are additional explicit or hidden concerns confronting IDS. Such concerns often revolve around the challenges pertaining to adaptation to institutional and cultural "norms" or changing cultural identity (Holliday 2017; Li et al., 2023). When combined with distinct doctoral-related matters (e.g. supervisory relationships, isolation, work/life balance), this may cause concern for the mental health of this particular group (Blackmore et al., 2020).

Not discounting the challenges that IDS often face, this study highlights the positive aspects of the IDS experience via their interactions and communication practices, e.g. what they can offer and contribute to make a positive impact on theirs and others' development. This approach moves away from the deficit narratives, which comprise stereotypes, limitations and challenges encountered, prevalent in international studies (Mittelmeier and Yang, 2022).

4. Summary of research outcomes

- Intercultural interactions are both common and unique among IDS. They characterise the majority of IDS' actions while doing a PhD abroad. These interactions embody doctoral socialisation that is also shared with other scholars.
- Intercultural interactions flourish and become reciprocally beneficial through active membership in communities – offering IDS channels of academic, social and psychological support.
- Intercultural interactions play a crucial role in shaping and broadening IDS' interests, dispositions, approaches, visions, and even acquisition of distinct practical skills.

5. Research methodology

In this mixed-methods study, a novel approach was adopted for conducting complementary desk and empirical research. Phase 1 employed the less-utilised index of doctoral theses awarded by UK universities available at E-Theses Online Service (EThOS, see <https://ethos.bl.uk>). A systematic search based on the PRISMA guidelines yielded 364 doctoral theses with eleven (n=11) included in the recommended step-by-step data analysis and synthesis (Boland et al., 2017; Thomas and Harden, 2008). (See Appendix 1.)

Phase 2 involved using River of Experience (RoE) drawings as stimuli to encourage participants' creative and greater reflection prior to and during the interview. Five participants, whose doctoral theses were included in the systematic review, were instructed to draw rivers as metaphors for their doctoral journeys, which enabled a deeper exploration of participants' experience – unveiling nuanced insights that are not typically revealed in ordinary interviews (Iantaffi, 2011). Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic approach was employed in the NVivo-facilitated interview data analysis. (Note: Protecting the anonymity of Phase 2 participants requires the use of another system in presenting the interview findings in Section 7, e.g. P001 to P005.)

6. Key research findings: Systematic Review

Distinct international doctoral experience

PhD scholars who embark on studying abroad reported managing distinct encounters linked to the experience of a) relocating to another country, and b) “unknown” challenges owing to the PhD’s genre (i.e. unstructured, isolated pedagogy) when compared to undergraduate or Master’s. Accordingly, perplexity starts in Year 1 where adjustment involves not merely learning “where to begin” and how to manage time effectively, but also in dealing with loneliness and navigating cultural differences in supervisory relationships.

“When I stayed alone, my heart was empty. The silence was too suffocating” (Lou, #6).

“Sometimes I find that my supervisors, perhaps because they are from a different culture, they don’t understand my emotions ... there is a lack of empathy” (Trần, #9).

These passages convey experiences that may occur to many IDS. While the first concern arises due to geographical distance from family, the second may occur to due to cognitive dissonance (inconsistency in knowledge or beliefs potentially leading to cognitive tension) (Colman, 2015).

Acculturative experiences within academia

Generally, academia is regarded as the main base for learning. Among IDS, academic acculturation (or “effectively managing and reconciling differing academic traditions and learning experiences”) comes naturally via daily interactions within and outside academia (Elliot, 2023, p.6).

Such interactions with peers and staff from both within and outwith the host country are likely sources of development and support for different domains as exemplified below:

Personal

“... this Ph.D. [offers] the experiences that you get when you meet people from other cultures. This is something valuable ... I will never have the chance to experience that again” (Hsiang, #5).

Academic

“[My] officemates ... help me so much because whenever I ask something ... they [are] willing to help and find some related resources for me They are another big support for my study” (Abrar, #1).

“My academic life has developed because ... I’ve attended many seminars, workshops ... I really feel that I have changed ... that I belong to a community and feel myself as a researcher” (Sadoudi, #7).

“Now, I got this kind of self-confidence ... thanks to the engagement that I took ... my interaction with academics was fruitful and I learnt from it, and that helped me to improve my academic identity” (Sadoudi, #7).

Psychological

“... we are more like friends ... **most of us are away from our family, country**; we have many many things in common” (Taj, #8).

While these accounts stress rewards stemming from intercultural interactions, these interactions are arguably a two-way process that potentially offer reciprocal benefits – for international PhD scholars themselves and those with whom they interact. Equally, whereas intercultural interactions are deemed rewarding, IDS intercultural interactions are also often curtailed by their lack of time due to PhD research work.

“I had all intentions of having more social time and going to PGR [postgraduate researchers] events on campus but I just had so much work to do...” (Flax, #4).

Acculturative experiences outwith academia

Huge learning takes place outside academic premises, particularly for IDS where each interaction is strictly intercultural. The findings suggest that there is a large degree of cross-over between intercultural interactions taking place within and outwith academia, involving the same groups of scholars, and with their impact overlapping academic and personal domains. The passage below points to the value of intercultural interactions, which lead to meaningful relationships formed during the PhD and beyond.

“I think the relationships between us are valuable to maintain. The friends are not only for now but for the rest of my life” (Wang, #10).

Intercultural interactions that took place outside academia tended to complement academia-based interactions. They serve as extensions of opportunities for learning and educating others, e.g. teaching about Muslim culture to clarify potential issues and misconceptions, and in turn, gaining “respect”. Communities generally serve as platforms, facilitating intercultural interactions, for which the benefits can be observed across personal, academic and psychological domains as suggested in these passages:

“I realised **I have started to live for me**, which is something I never used to do in the past. It’s a combination of growing older, and the experience of the PhD” (Trần, #9).

“... I think it’s certainly developed my potential... and certainly will **develop my personality as well ...**” (Binti, #3).

“... I was a person and now, I’m a different person. So yes, of course **we learn, we change and develop**. Who I am now is accumulative” (Taj, #8).

Participants’ reflections speak of autonomy and liberation, personality development and ongoing growth. Participants noted how community membership within academia, even when interactions take place outside academia, has the added advantage of facilitating understanding of “experience”, “feelings”, “thinking process” and “struggles”.

7. Key Research Findings: Interviews

As reported in the IDS literature, “living far away from family” was considered “lonely” (P002). Loneliness can be exacerbated by concerns about family back home (e.g. parents’ health issues), prompting scholars to consider whether they should “stop [their] PhD and go back” (P004).

Intercultural interactions within academia

Interactions with supervisors and peers was viewed as the primary means of doctoral socialisation, facilitating researcher development. While some supervisors’ less directive and “hands-off” approach might be initially challenging, it equally fostered researcher independence and a deeper grasp of research.

“Because we have to kind of **figure out things on our own** ... meetings with [supervisors] would, maybe [make me] feel anxious and confused because I ... felt ... I have no idea what I’m doing.” (P005)

On the other hand, interactions with other scholars assisted their understanding of the PhD genre, fostered cross-fertilisation of ideas and provided practical help as well as social and psychological support – often in a reciprocal manner. P001 underscored: “**it did take a village** to help me finish my PhD.”

“My office mates ... were very helpful [sharing] information [for] issues we were struggling with ... they ... would go out of their way ... and see how they could [help].” (P004)

Likewise, interactions with others enhanced understanding of the wide range of challenges facing international doctoral scholars, fostering intellectual and emotional maturity and leading to propensity to assist others.

“[As] the student rep at the School ... I was able to connect [and it] gave me the opportunity **to understand the challenges** [doctoral scholars] were having ... that [connected] with other experiences which I think were very valuable.” (P005)

Social interactions with co-nationals provided a sense of community and familiarity, offering a comfort zone, emotional support and a touch of “home” while in the host country through shared cultural practices. Notably, interactions with co-nationals led to specific academic PhD-related benefits (e.g. finding potential study participants).

“When there were festivities that we celebrated, we would prepare together, and then we would have meals together ... in many ways, **it felt like home**, and ... **it made it easy**.” (P004)

“in the second year I got to know more [home country] PhD friends ... most of them were potential participants for my study.” (P003)

These findings suggest that intercultural interactions of IDS within academia are vital highlighting their intersecting significance with socialisation processes. These interactions not only aid in academic and personal development but also in building networks that are crucial for navigating the challenges while enhancing overall doctoral experience.

Intercultural interactions outwith academia

Significantly, even connections with people with previous international doctoral experience were invaluable in navigating the academic landscape (e.g. advice for how to approach supervision), resulting in a better understanding of the PhD genre:

“I shouldn’t go to meet [supervisors] with a blank [mind] ... it means I should read a lot and prepare questions to ask them ... that advice of my colleagues in [home country], who [did] a PhD abroad, helped me a lot.” (P003)

Similarly, intercultural interactions with local people in the host country fostered intellectual maturity and a deeper understanding of culture, the importance of building connections and communities outside academic circles.

“living here, knowing, being here, even opens up more of understanding ... of the culture and experiences here, and **some of those same experiences go beyond being a student.”** (P005)

These findings suggest that IDS’ intercultural interactions outwith academia are essential, aiding academic navigation and fostering deeper cultural understanding, contributing to personal growth, wellbeing and enriching life experiences beyond the confines of academia.

Impact of intercultural interactions post-PhD

IDS stressed how these intercultural interactions that formed a crucial part of their PhD played a pivotal role in shaping their subsequent professional careers. Having acquired a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of doctoral experience abroad, these interactions were instrumental in developing or acquiring capacity for –

- open-mindedness, critical thinking, problematising and questioning ideas,
- practical skills, e.g. patience, time management, adaptability,
- adopting a culturally sensitive teaching approach, and
- applying their IDS experience to mentor new scholars about international student experience.

Finally, IDS’ intercultural interactions contributed to cultural adaptation, enabling them to maintain wellbeing amidst various challenges and succeed in doctoral studies.

8. Conclusions

Findings from both the systematic review of doctoral theses and creative interviews highlight the cross-over of intercultural interactions taking place within and outside academia and its overlapping impact in different domains – academic, social and psychological. When IDS experiences are put under the spotlight, convergences between the doctoral socialisation process and intercultural interactions become more apparent.

Generally, the doctoral socialisation process is recognised as PhD scholars' core means of personal and professional learning (Johnson et al., 2017). This is how they acquire and deepen their subject expertise and research competence, acquire a disposition for researcher independence and develop academic identity. For IDS, doctoral socialisation greatly overlaps with acculturative experiences and intercultural interactions, by virtue of almost every interaction being intercultural by nature. Intercultural interactions within academia tend to revolve around supervisors. After all, supervisory meetings are possibly the most regular events in doctoral scholars' learning routine. This is also the case among IDS, only that these interactions are commonly influenced by cultural differences, which can have an impact on their progression, relationship with supervisors and wellbeing.

For IDS, communities are likened to their metaphorical “village” that offers various forms of support – academic, personal, psychological, even practical assistance – throughout their doctoral journey. In this respect, the crucial roles played by two particular community groups have been highlighted in both the systematic review and interviews. While interaction with the doctoral communities enables personal and professional growth and development from those who can understand what a doctoral journey actually entails (e.g. labyrinthine literature review, the business of knowledge creation), establishing communities with co-nationals, often prompted by an invisible but shared bond of language, customs, and even food preferences, serves as a channel of support. Although the emphasis might be different, both doctoral and co-national communities offer a sense of belonging by creating a psychological comfort zone for IDS. Interview participants stressed the distinct contribution from pursuing intercultural interactions with local people from the host country, i.e. a deeper and richer understanding of culture and society beyond the academic sphere that IDS normally inhabit.

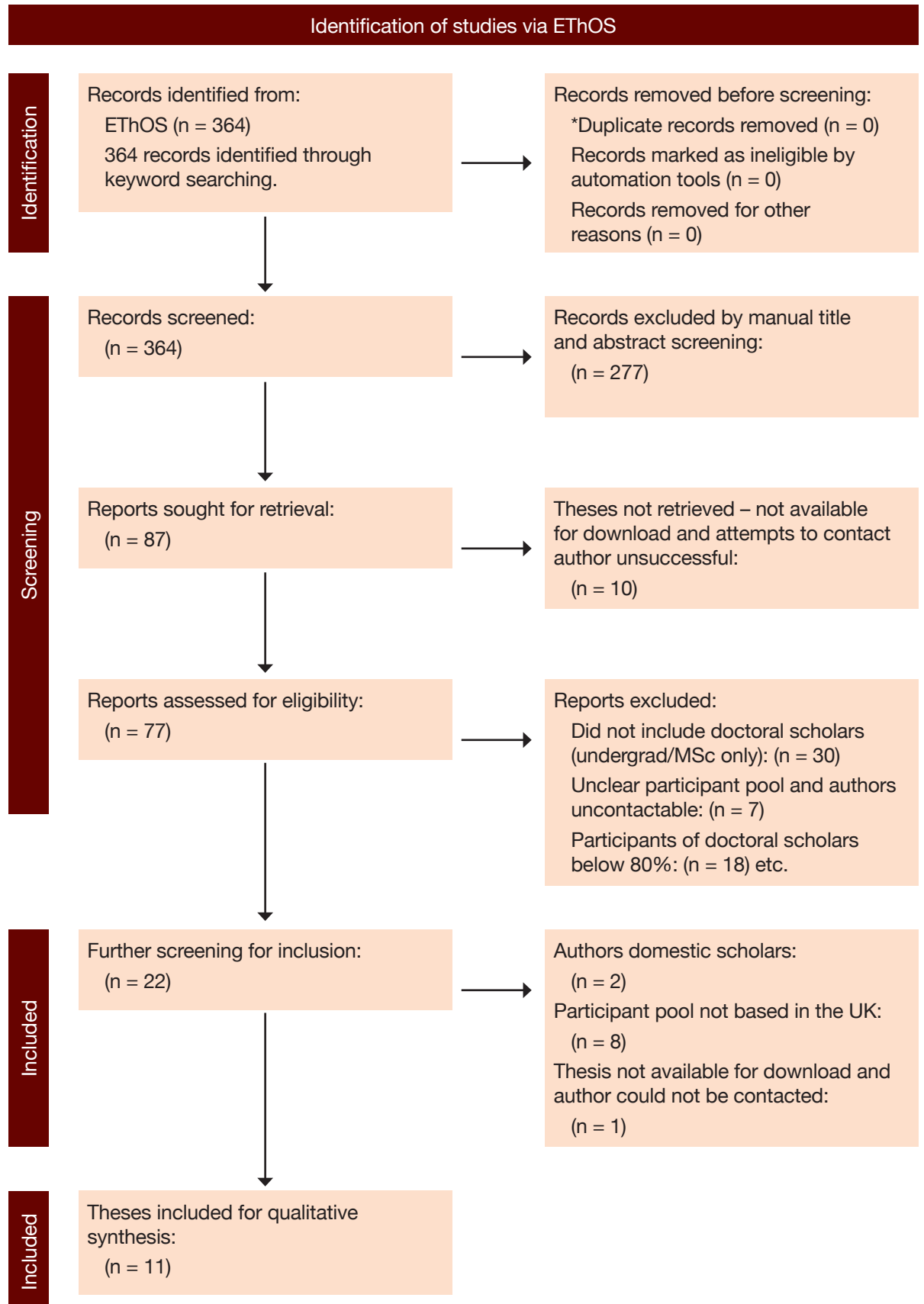
These findings strongly support the cross-over importance and intertwined impact of intercultural interactions within and outwith academia, for IDS and those with whom they interact. In sum, this study endorses how all forms of intercultural interactions are potential channels of support – academic, social and psychological. This may even nurture IDS' wellbeing, serving as a buffer for any negative intercultural incidents encountered.

9. Recommendations for UK HE institutions

- IDS need to take cognisance of intercultural interactions as a form of doctoral socialisation. Active membership in communities will maximise the benefits of intercultural interactions.
- Graduate Schools may actively foster, establish or facilitate three channels of intercultural interactions for IDS: a) doctoral communities; b) communities for co-nationals; and c) platforms affording active interactions between IDS and local people from the host country.
- IDS bring with them an amalgam of knowledge, insights, cultural wisdom and distinct practices. In this respect, future research need to focus on investigating more comprehensively how these qualities can be harnessed.

10. Appendices

Appendix 1: PRISMA flow-chart for Systematic Review.



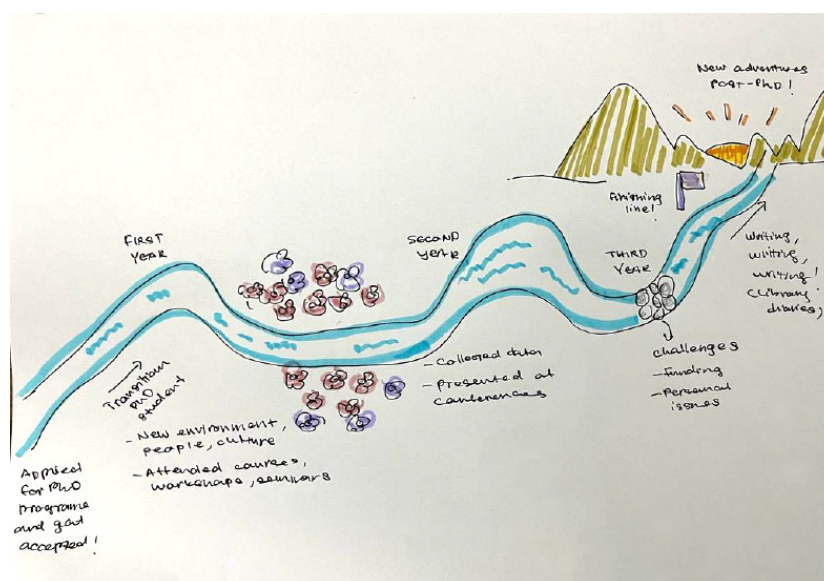
*Search function on Ethos – detailed in limitations section. As one database search only, no duplicates to remove. KG conducted multiple line-by-line searches and manually screened all these.

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Appendix 2: Example of River of Experience drawing



Appendix 2: Example of River of Experience drawing

P004 RoE

Appendix 3: Author Demographics.

Thesis Number	Author Name	Thesis Title	Institution Location and Submission Year
1.	Abrar, Mukhlash	International Doctoral Students: Struggling, Coping, and Learning in a United Kingdom University	Belfast, Northern Ireland; 2019
2.	Al-Qahtani, Huda Ali Saeed	We Are No Longer the Same: Saudi Female Doctoral Students and Saudi Third Culture Kids Studying in the UK and Returning Home	Lincoln, England; 2021
3.	Binti, Anuar, Nuramira	Transnational Journeys: Changing Identities, Perceptions and Experiences of Malaysian Doctoral Students Studying in the UK	Glasgow, Scotland; 2019
4.	Flax, Tracey Naomi	The Flow Between Spaces: the Experiences of International Doctoral Candidates' Negotiation and Construction of Professional Identity on Social Media	Leeds, England; 2019
5.	Hsiang, Ying Ying Nikko	Overseas Doctoral Students' Identity Evolution	Exeter, England; 2018
6.	Lou, Chenyiman	The Adaptation Experiences of Chinese PhD Students in the UK	Leicester, England; 2022
7.	Sadoudi, Yasmine	'Travelling to the West': Voices of Algerian PhD Students' Transition to Britain	Kent, England; 2021
8.	Taj, Sarah Rushdi	Saudi Students' Social Identity and their Identity in Academic Writing: a Qualitative Study of Saudi Students in the UK	Leicester, England; 2017
9.	Trần, Trang	Learning to Thrive: a Longitudinal Mixed Methods Exploration of the Intercultural Doctoral Experience	Bristol, England; 2019
10.	Wang, Yiran	A Study on Transformative Learning of UK Students in China and Chinese students in the UK	Edinburgh, Scotland; 2018
11.	Witayarat, Nasatorn	A Segue in Thai Cultural Identity: Impressions of International Students' Doctoral Experiences in the UK and their Re-Patriation Upon Return to Home Country	Glasgow, Scotland; 2020

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