

Pathways to Success

University of Kent



Research into the
international student
experience in the UK
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Pathways to Success University of Kent

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1. Executive summary

This project has been devised in order to collect information from students studying at universities across the University Pathways Alliance (UPA) about their experiences on international pathways to undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in the UK.

The research identifies benefits and challenges derived from studying on an international pathway programme and makes recommendations through students own voices, which are intended to be relevant to international students who are planning to follow similar programmes in the future. In this way, the project is intended to present a student-to-student resource which will have relevance across the sector and to students all around the world.

The surveys and interviews, used to collect data in this project, were organised according to six categories. These were as follows:

- Subject knowledge
- Study skills
- Adapting to life in the UK
- Personal and social development
- Language
- Global citizenship

The results indicate patterns of perceived benefit in joining a pathway programme in terms of students' views on their development across the identified categories. This has then enabled the identification of a set of recommendations for educators to take into account in their development and review of similar pathways programmes, across the sector. The student views gathered will also inform a student handbook and set of video resources which will be open source. (Links will be available on the UKCISA website)

Please note that a longer report which includes further demographic data and appendices is available online.

2. Introduction and rationale

The main aim of this project has been to continue to further enhance and support international students across the UK, as they seek to embark on international pathway programmes, which will ultimately qualify them for undergraduate or postgraduate studies at UK universities.

The term 'International Pathways', has been used to refer to a range of different areas of programme delivery which provide access for international students to undergraduate or postgraduate study. This includes:

- International Foundation Programmes (IFPs) leading to undergraduate study,
- Pre-Masters Programmes, in preparation for postgraduate study, and



- Pre-sessional Courses in English for Academic Purposes and Academic Skills. Pre-sessional courses can lead to either undergraduate or postgraduate study and can be combined or taught in different level groups.

The study draws on the expertise and proactive collaboration of the eight member institutions of the University Pathways Alliance (UPA). The UPA (2018) is an alliance of highly-respected international pathways to UK degrees which are designed, managed and delivered directly by UPA member universities. The UPA has been established by eight high-ranking UK universities and is intended to provide effective mechanisms for information exchange and communication. Current UPA member institutions are as follows:

- University of Birmingham
- Cardiff University
- University of Kent
- University of Leeds
- Oxford Brookes University
- University of Reading
- University of Southampton
- Queen Mary University of London

As noted by Hyland (2006), in recent years, international student recruitment has become a fixed priority for the UK and the international university sector at large. Also on the matter of internationalisation in HE, Leask (2009) contends that, institutional interest in aspects of internationalisation is a result of the "increased interconnections between nations and peoples of the world" produced by globalization (p.205).

This project takes the view that 'international students are crucial to the diversity of our campuses and the experience of UK students, both academically and culturally. When students return home, or move on to the world of work, it is these strong professional and personal links that provide long-term, 'soft power' benefits for the UK.' (University of Edinburgh and the British Council, 2017 and Manning, in Britcher 2017). Evidence such as that gathered by HEPI & Kaplan (2018) also shows how the benefit to the UK of international students is ten times that of the costs.

In line with this phenomenon, the provision of international pathway programmes as a means for international students to access HE, is an area of activity which has also developed rapidly in recent decades. The importance of this route into HE is highlighted by the volume of students who are engaging with such international pathways. Similarly, given these circumstances, quality and innovation are of critical importance to allow international pathway programmes to continue to thrive (Manning, 2018).

A recent estimation (Study Portals, 2015) has calculated more than 1,000 programmes across the world and almost two thirds of programmes based in the UK.

According to some of HESA's most recent statistics (2015) 7,990 non-UK domiciled students were registered at UK universities for non-degree undergraduate courses, many of whom would represent registrations on IFPs or Pre-Masters programmes.

Data for private providers of international pathways (Centre Forum, 2011) shows that private providers in the UK enrolled more than 15,400 students onto their pathways in 2011 and that an estimated 40% of non-EU HEI students had previously studied via a pathway provider in the UK in 2013/14.

The findings drawn from this research project will create important new resources which will harness the power of international pathways students' own voices in order to support new students in their quest for success in pathways to UK HE.

The impact of the research will be broadened through the creation and championing of the newly-created resources by the eight institutions of the UPA, each member of which will contribute to the project and the implementation of the resources which emerge. The materials, in the form of a handbook and set of video testimonials, will also be made available in an open-source format for future pathways students and international pathway programme providers to access within the UK and beyond.

3. Theoretical framework

As Duff (2002, p.22) acknowledges, a greater understanding and appreciation of different research methods can assist in developing the scope of research in the academic field. Furthermore, according to Dörnyei (2007, p.44) insight into complementary realities can be particularly advantageous in Applied Linguistics. It is clear to see that this is true of other instances where information on international students' needs has been collected. It is an approach that enables



the identification of complementary realities to be seen as positive for the validity and reliability of interpretations.

Pragmatism is generally regarded as an appropriate paradigm for mixed methods inquiry (Denscombe, 2010, p.149). It comprises a set of assumptions about ontology and epistemology, which differentiates the underlying philosophy from positivism and interpretivism whilst including a number of the features advocated by critical theorists and deconstructivists. A number of the axioms associated with pragmatism have been summarised below in Table 1:

Table 1: Pragmatism - a paradigm for this research into student perceptions of success

Features of pragmatism	Type of support
Ontology	Today's truth may not be truth tomorrow. Absolute truth is a hopeless cause.
Epistemology	Knowledge is provisional and based on practical outcomes. Knowledge is judged on usefulness and how it can be applied.
Methodology	There is no single best method leading to indisputable knowledge. Perceived dualisms in research paradigms and methods are seen as unhelpful. There is scepticism about the distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods.
Friends who have experience with doctoral work	Emotional, academic
Friends without experience with doctoral work	Emotional, perspective, escape
Peers from their country or culture	Emotional, cultural adjustment, escape
Neighbours or housemates	Social adjustment, belonging

The construct used to steer this investigation and the collection of data to respond to the research questions was developed through consultation with colleagues across the UPA and a collective understanding of how students should expect to develop and progress through study on international pathway programmes, as mechanisms to join undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

Once an initial construct was developed, this was also informed with reference to areas of focus within the International Student Lifecycle project (Advance HE, 2018). In addition, given the international focus of the research and the researchers' interest in students' international student experience a set of items was added in the area of global citizenship.

As a result, the construct and key themes for areas of perceived development and progress, as measures of challenge or success, used for the questionnaire and interviews, were as follows:

Table 2: Thematic construct for the project

Construct for areas of student perceived development and progress as measures of challenge or success
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Subject knowledge ▪ Study skills ▪ Adapting to life in the UK ▪ Personal and social development ▪ Language ▪ Global citizenship

This stage of the project was essential in order to establish accurately the type of data which needed to be collected, Mason (2002, p.48-50) The triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data collected from both the survey and interview tools was used to provide an additional level of corroboration for the identified findings (Dörnyei, 2007, p.165).



4. Research questions

The venture recognises the importance and impact of international pathway provision as a key route into HE for international students from across the world. A key aim of the project is to enhance the understanding of the challenges faced by this group of international students, which occupies a marginal position within HE, in order to improve the experience of future international pathways students.

The 'Pathways to Success' project seeks to collect the views of students who have completed international pathway programmes, such as IFPs, pre-sessional courses and pre-Masters, in order to identify patterns and present recommendations which will help future students.



The research questions which underpin this project is as follows:

- What are the views of international pathway students regarding the challenges faced in taking an international pathway programme?
- What are the benefits which they have derived from this route into university study?
- What recommendations do these students who have progressed have for future students who are following in their footsteps?

5. Research methodology

The research involved the design and dissemination of a survey tool and the conducting of interviews with international pathway students across the eight universities in the UPA. It should be noted that the original research proposal referenced the collection of data from focus groups, however, when considering the need to video students and the number of willing participants, it was decided that interviews would be a preferable approach.

In line with the pragmatic paradigm approach, the research followed a mixed method approach to data collection. This involved the following research tools:

- A. The design of an online survey tool, including items which enable both quantitative and qualitative analysis of collected data. The survey was designed in order to be administered to students across the eight institutions of the University Pathways Alliance. In order to capture information regarding the challenges experienced by pathways students who have now successfully progressed onto their intended degree programmes.
- B. The design and running of a series of interviews, also to be filmed, with students studying at different UPA universities in the UK.

5.1 Survey design

For the purposes of the survey created for this research agenda, it was decided to use an online survey tool in order to be able to access a sufficiently wide number of respondents across the UPA institutions. The survey was designed and offered for review by the eight member institutions of the UPA.

Typically, questionnaires and surveys are complex structures used for data collection focusing on items which request quite specific information. It is generally accepted that questionnaires seek to measure factual, behavioural and attitudinal information (Bethlehem, 2009, p.44; Denscombe, 2010 p.11-13; Dörnyei, 2003, p.5; 2007, p.102). Given this situation, it can be seen that the questionnaire is useful for the quantitative aspect of this research agenda, a number of questions were also included which also allowed for flexible open responses in the survey and qualitative analysis. The full questionnaire, which was administered to respondents is available in Appendix 2 of the online version of this document.

In order to ensure that the questions were fit for purpose the following steps were implemented (Bryman, 2008, p.241-244):

- The research questions, were kept in view in order to ensure that the survey items accurately reflected the research objectives
- Questions were written with the solicitation of specific types of information in mind and
- Questions were revised in order to attempt to ensure that they were not too general or obtuse in nature.
- Where possible ambiguous and technical terminology was avoided and where applicable complex concepts were explained

5.2 Interview design

In designing the interview protocol, a semi-structured approach to questioning was identified in conjunction with the research questions for the project, and there was also close reference to the construct under investigation, as discussed earlier



in Table 2. In addition, key themes which emerged from analysis of the survey, were also available to the researcher, so that these could assist with identifying patterns of information which could potentially be supported or refuted through the interviews.

The framework adopted for the interviews is evident from the interview summary records in Appendix 3 (which you can read in the online version of this report at www.ukcisa.org.uk).

6. Research ethics and confidentiality

The proposed research adheres to the University of Kent's ethical approval procedures for data collection and usage and retention and pays close attention to the regulations as described in new GDPR regulations. In advance of embarking on the research, ethical approval was gained and participants were made aware of this through the Participant Information Sheet. All participants were required to confirm their understanding of the purpose, aims of the research and use of their data





during the completion of the survey and in advance of participating in the interviews and associated videos.

7. Analysis

For the purpose of analysing the data collected through the survey and interview methods, a series of tools were identified. This includes histograms, representing the results of Likert scale items and pie charts to indicate incidence and spread of responses. These mechanisms were utilised in order to identify common or prevalent tendencies which emerge from individual questionnaire items and Likert scales.

Content analysis was identified as an appropriate analysis method for open responses in the survey and interviews. This tool examines and organises patterns of meaning in data such as, qualitative open-response data and interview responses. (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p.314). For the purpose of this research project, it was used with interview summaries and video records, in order to identify meaning or trends embedded within

qualitative responses. In qualitative content analysis categories of meaning surface through close examination and, according to Denscombe (2010, p.281-283), as a result content analysis can reveal otherwise hidden aspects within texts.

One aim in using mixed methods and the above-mentioned forms of analysis is to enable triangulation of findings which can then inform recommendations. These recommendations will inform the handbook and the arrangement of video resources on the website where the project materials will be displayed for public access.

8. Findings

8.1 Summary of demographic data

Overall, the demographic data from the survey respondents appears to show that there was a sufficiently high level of engagement with the survey in order to make the extrapolations relevant for broader generalisation. This was due to the broad range of respondent domiciles which also correlated with the most frequent regional domicile groups of the broader UK international HE. The interviewees also included representatives from a broad range of nationalities and had representatives from the Asia, Europe and Africa regions. Despite a slight skew due to the high volume of pre-sessional students at one institution, the spread of programmes which survey respondents have referred to also mirrors the breadth of engagement with pathways in the wider UK sector. The data also provides sufficient volumes of information from survey respondents who have attended undergraduate and postgraduate pathways. The interview data also showed a spread of



programmes of study across both undergraduate and postgraduate pathways.

Data from both the interviews and survey also indicates that respondents and interviewees have completed their pathways study sufficiently recently, so as to be able to provide relevant data on their experiences in their transition to higher levels of study.

With regard to gender split, the survey data mirrors the sector, to some extent, showing a higher number of female respondents. However, the interview data shows more male interviewees than females. This could be considered as a mitigating mechanism to balance the views of the survey responses which gained a higher proportion of female respondents.

Full details and analysis of the demographic data is available in the online version of this report.

8.2 Survey item analysis

The survey questions were organised into six main categories, as linked to the construct for the investigation, as follows:

1. Subject knowledge development
2. Study skills development
3. Adapting to life in the UK
4. Personal and social development
5. Language development
6. Development as a global citizen

For each category, respondents were asked to identify whether their programme of study had helped them to develop in that particular area and to grade their progress. In addition to this, they were asked what they had found the most difficult and the most useful relating to each specific category, and what they would do differently if they were to do the same programme of study again. These latter open questions provided rich feedback which we have rationalised into main themes.

8.2.1 Survey quantitative results

Results show there is clear benefit in joining a pathway programme in terms of students' perceptions of development across the identified categories, with an overall of 77% of respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing that their programme of study had helped them develop and 90% of respondents awarding themselves a 3, 4, or 5 out of 5 for their progress across the categories (with 5% as progressed a lot and 0% indicating no progress at all). There is variation between the programmes of study with only 60% of IFY students strongly agreeing or agreeing that their programme of study had helped them develop and 87% of respondents awarding themselves a 3, 4, or 5 out of 5 for their progress across the categories. By contrast, 68% of pre-sessional students and 78%

Table 3 Most common themes in open questions (What was the most difficult? What was the most useful? What would you do differently?)

Open question themes
Academic writing and essays
Adapting to UK
Available resources including electronic materials
Be better prepared
Be more open/attentive to others
Communication with locals
Critical thinking, analysis and applying knowledge
Feedback/supportive teachers
Finding something in common with other students
Grammar
Independent living
Interacting/socialising with different cultures
Language barrier/communication
Listening
Listening skills
Reading and library skills
Research and referencing
Sharing different cooking
Social interaction (generally)
Speaking
Study skills development and independent learning
Subject focus and particular modules
Unwelcoming British
Views and opinions on lecturers and support and guidance
Vocabulary/reading

of pre-Master's students strongly agreed or agreed that their programme of study had helped them develop and 90% of Pre-sessional students and 96% of pre-Master's students awarding themselves a 3, 4, or 5 out of 5 for their progress across the categories. It was hoped that the open questions would allow for some indication as to why there is such variance but the responses have not shed light on this. This is therefore an area to be researched further in order to identify reasons for the variance.

Overall, respondents saw the programme supporting their development the most in study skills (84%), language (82%) and subject knowledge (81%) and the least in their development as a global citizen. The above is true of respondents on all programmes with study skills, language and subject knowledge development being top for IFY, pre-Master's and pre-sessional students alike. However, while both IFY and pre-sessional students have identified their development as a global citizen being least supported, pre-Master's students have identified adapting to life in the UK and personal and social development as the least supported on their course. The fact that more pre-sessional students (73%) than IFY students (65%) saw their

course as supporting subject knowledge development could be seen as contradictory given that IFY will invariably include subject modules as part of the programme whereas pre-sessional will not focus as clearly on subject knowledge. The efforts on pre-sessional courses to bring in authentic materials and require students to write about their chosen subject specialism, however, seems to counteract the lack of clear subject focus.

Respondents indicated they had made the most progress in adapting to life in the UK and their study skills development (both 91%) but the least development in becoming a global citizen (85%). While adapting to life in the UK was not one of the categories where respondents saw their programme of study supporting their development the most, they felt they had developed a lot in this area. This discrepancy can be expected given that much of the adapting to life in the UK will happen outside of the programme of study. There is little variation across the different courses although 100% of pre-Master's students indicated they had improved or improved a lot in their language skills development.

8.2.2 Survey qualitative results

As mentioned above, in relation to each of the six categories respondents were asked what on the course they had found the most difficult and the most useful, and what they would do differently if they did the same programme of study again. There were a wide range of responses to these questions for each category and these have been rationalised into a maximum of five main themes which attracted the highest number of similar responses and one 'other' which encompasses all other responses. Some themes are common across most questions; writing and speaking both appear nine times across a total of 18 questions. What respondents would do differently regarding their development as a global citizen attracted the fewest responses (27) whereas difficulties in language development attracted the most (90). It should be noted, however, that the 'what you would do differently' questions consistently attracted fewer responses. The main themes listed against each of the questions and references to difficulty, usefulness and areas which students would approach differently in future, are included in Appendix 2 (which you can read in the online version of this report). Table 6 gives an overview of the most common themes referenced by respondents, spread across themes and questions.

What is apparent from the data is that respondents identified the same items for *most difficult* and *most useful*, and in many cases *what you would do differently*. This seems to suggest that students found those items challenging either before joining or once on their programme of study but then



found that the training received was useful in overcoming that same difficulty. Where items recur in all three questions one might conclude that students had now reflected on their needs in more depth and were they to start again would focus more on those areas they now understand and both challenging but useful.

For the three categories which we may see as more traditional learning outcomes for pathway programmes (development of subject knowledge, study skills and language) the main themes from responses also match a traditional English for Academic Purposes syllabus, including academic writing (specifically of essays), reading (of academic writing), and academic interactions (more specifically lectures and seminars). Some of these themes also appear in the other three question sets (adapting to life in the UK, personal and social development and global citizenship) but with a different focus. For example, speaking is mentioned as challenging in the context of adapting to life in the UK, of personal and social development and of developing as a global citizen, and consistently speaking more to more people in a wider range of contexts appears as something respondents would do differently.

It seems advisable for all involved in the management and design of pathway programmes to ensure they give students the largest number of opportunities to engage with the items identified in each theme. It might also be useful to more clearly highlight the advantages of each category and their themes to learners, in order for us to better support our students and for them to gain the best advantage of their learning opportunity.

8.3 Interview analysis

In total eight interviews were conducted with participants stemming from five of the eight UPA member institutions. Although attempts were made to recruit participating students from each of the UPA institutions, as this relied on volunteers, after a number of attempts the researchers accepted that the number secured was the optimal position.

Interview questioning followed the same pattern as the structure of the survey and involved asking

students to comment on their development and progress in the areas associated with the thematic construct for the project:

- Subject knowledge
- Study skills
- Adapting to life in the UK
- Personal and social development
- Language
- Global citizenship

At the time of the interview sessions, the interviewer also had access to the most prevalent themes which had emerged from both the qualitative and quantitative items in the survey.

8.3.1 Interview themes

With regard to **subject knowledge** there appeared to be a consensus from interviews that their knowledge developed during the pathway programme which they attended and this was closely linked to their progressively developing skills in using English for academic purposes.

Comments linked to **study skills** overlapped with those made about subject knowledge but a number of interviewees referred to aspects of critical thinking and referencing skills as particularly important and useful.

When interviewees referred to **adapting to life in the UK**, a common thread was linked to communication with local people and the challenges associated with initiating successful conversations in informal situations.

As far as personal and **social development** is concerned, all respondents made reference to the importance of strategies for integration with the wider university or external community, with the strongest thread throughout all responses and themes being the shared view that joining university societies is important for personal and social development.

When discussing **language development**, all respondents mentioned the importance or challenges of developing listening skills in the academic and social context. Other language skills referred to by numerous interviewees, also overlapping with references to study skills, include, reading and speaking.

Regarding the **development of global citizenship**, nearly all interviewees appeared to recognise the value in mixing with a wide range of different nationalities and the intercultural understandings which could be benefitted from. Three respondents, spread across three different institutions referred to the fact that their broader international experience at university was challenged by large numbers of students from a particular nationality grouping.

On the matter of additional reflections, the researchers found these to be particularly engaging accounts which provide further meaningful contextualisation of the points raised across the themes in the survey responses. These were deemed important to capture within the video resources which will form part of the project output.

8.4 Summary of survey overall findings combined from the survey and interviews

The results of the quantitatively focused items demonstrate that international pathway students acknowledge a clear sense of development across all the subcategories listed.

Of all the areas of potential development within their programme of study, which students were asked to comment on, respondents agreed most strongly that development in study skills, language use and subject knowledge was derived through their studies. This was also supported by comments from respondents in open questions.

The interview data also supports the fact that students feel that their knowledge and study skills have developed during their pathway programme. In addition to skills in using English for Academic Purposes, the interview comments reveal students' appreciation of developing skills in critical thinking and referencing their research.

It was noted from the quantitative data that a sense of development through students' programme of study was heightened amongst students who had followed postgraduate-focused pathways. Interestingly, in the open comments from the qualitative data, there also appears to be a linkage between references to challenge, which is embedded within programmes of study, and student perceptions of usefulness. This indicates that students realise that they need to confront complex ideas and skills in order to make significant progress.

In terms of where respondents felt they made the most progress during their programme of study, the quantitative data suggests that this was in adapting to life in the UK and study skills development. This is also backed up by the interview data which shows how a number of students took time to learn how to communicate with local residents in different social contexts.

In the qualitative survey data, language development also received the highest number of comments in the open questions. It is also clear that writing and speaking were frequently occurring themes across all open questions when reference to development and challenge is made. Other frequent references include reference to student

focus and teaching of subject knowledge and study skills. This is backed up with frequent references to the same topics within the quantitative survey data and through reference to the importance of study skills, via the interview data. During the interviews when discussing language development, listening skills were the most commonly referenced priority.

Lower levels of development and progress were noted or made reference to in Global Citizenship in both the qualitative and quantitative data from the survey. When this is considered in conjunction with the interview data it appears that this may be due to large groups of international students from particular nationality groups and the influence which this has on students who are representatives of smaller populations of nationality on their programme of study. Linked to this aspect of networking and social integration, when commenting on personal and social development, a number of interviewees made reference to the importance of strategies for integration with the wider university or external community. There appeared to be consensus that joining university societies is important for personal and social development.

9. Conclusions and implications for the handbook and video resources

As a result of the analysis of data collected and the key findings which have been extrapolated, the following recommendations have been reached. These are intended to be transferable to a broad range of contexts where educationalists are working with international students who are preparing to study in overseas contexts and will also, more

specifically inform the design and usage of the student handbook and video resources which will accompany this project.

- The students who have participated in this particular research project acknowledge that their programme of study has had an important impact on their success in preparing for higher levels of study in an international context. This is evidenced through patterns of perceived areas of development and progress, on international pathways programmes in the UPA group. As the UPA institutional membership is drawn from a cross-section of HE institutions and shares features of good practice with other high-quality providers in the broader sector, many of the categories and themes identified by students are relevant for interpretation and action in the wider international pathway arena. With regard to additional outputs from this project, the handbook and video resources, designed for open access, will draw on the key themes and messages, as presented by student participants. It is envisaged that this could help future students around the world to learn from their predecessors, and to help focus their attention on key areas of study as well as fostering broader supportive interaction with their community and new host culture.
- Respondents agreed most strongly that development in study skills, academic language use and subject knowledge was derived through their pathways studies. As a result, materials designed by educators for students' use should take this into account. Other areas which have emerged from the data, which are relevant for



consideration across the sector include the importance of continuing to encourage future students to develop their general EAP and Academic Skills. The data suggests that this is particularly the case in certain areas, including: critical thinking, reading and listening in and outside the classroom.

- The sense of development through students' programme of study appeared to be heightened amongst students who had followed postgraduate-focused pathways. This suggests that educators are likely to need to continue to assist students studying at pre-undergraduate level in tracking and noting their learning trajectory, in addition to giving ongoing attention to formative opportunities which encourage assessment for learning. The student handbook and videos from this research may also need to present the views and advice to undergraduate pathway students in a way which seeks to address the different approaches between undergraduate and postgraduate learners.
- Data from different sources shows that adapting to life in the UK was identified as a particular area of progress for students and that this can also be linked to personal and social development, when comments on communication strategies with local residents are factored in. This means that the handbook could also usefully draw future students' attention to the likely transition that they will experience when they start a pathway programme in the UK and strategies for understanding and engaging with local people.
- The results showed lower levels of progress and development in the sense of global citizenship, compared to the other sub constructs. Views expressed also refer to challenges of networking or interacting brought about by large groups of students from particular nationalities. When this is considered alongside the consensus that joining societies helps integration, it is strongly felt that this situation should be represented in the handbook in order to encourage students, from across the sector, to benefit from co-curricular support and mechanisms which assists with integration into the community.

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