

# Qualitative Data on University Students' Expectations of Intercultural Competence: Learning Under a New Zealand Education Style in China

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## 要約

ニュージーランドが先進国として初めて中国と自由貿易協定を結んで以来、ニュージーランドを訪れる中国人が増えている。特にニュージーランドに長期留学をする中国人学生が多くみられる為ニュージーランドの高等教育機関は2+2プログラムに力を入れている。2+2プログラムとは最初の2年間中国の大学でニュージーランド式教育法で勉学し、その後2年間ニュージーランドの大学に留学し中国の大学とニュージーランドの大学両学の学位を取得するといった長期留学ジョイントプログラムである。本研究はこの2+2プログラムの最初の2年に参加している中国人の大学2年生38名を対象にフォーカスグループインタビューを行い、中国式教育法で勉学してきた学生達がニュージーランド式教育法で勉学するにあたっての動機、問題点、嘱望や視点を収集するため質的研究を行いそのデータを分析した。その結果、英語のリスニング、リーディング、スピーキングの基本的な問題点が見られたが、特にペアレントの影響力やプレッシャーが動機として強いこと、そして二つの国の学習法、教育法の違いから異なるスキルを使う必要があることが示された。

## 1. Introduction

This study investigates university students' expectations and perspectives about learning within the New Zealand tertiary education system in China. This study focused upon a 2+2 international program between New Zealand and China. This program consists of two years of study in China and a further two years of study in New Zealand in order to complete a degree in both countries. All the courses the students undertook in New Zealand and China were provided and arranged by a New Zealand higher education provider. The importance of analyzing a program such as this becomes evident if one notes that export education is a rapidly growing industry that has particular significance for economies in the fourth phase of industrial revolutions. In order to understand the ways that participants make sense of different experiences, a qualitative approach will primarily be used for this research, with the focus upon participant perspectives. This focus is based upon the assumption that "...the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit" (Patton, 2002, p341). The overriding concern is to ensure that the participants' perspectives are presented as accurately as possible (Choudhuri, Glauswer & Peregoy, 2004). The participants involved in the 2+2 international program and were aged between 19 and 23, the second year of the program in China.

## **2. Method**

This research was produced by a series of taped/video focus group interviews with 38 (17 male and 21 female) second year students in China who were involved in the 2+2 international joint program. As this is a cross-cultural research project, I wished to avoid exploitation and ethnocentrism and thus employed a methodology that is culturally sensitive and encompasses Chinese values. In the initial stages of the research process negotiation occurred with the participants, and consensus agreements determined the final framework for data collection.

Focus groups were chosen primarily because they encompass the collective communication style of traditional Chinese and therefore provided a more secure, familiar environment for the intended participants. The group environment also enabled me to gain greater insights than I might have otherwise. The choice of focus groups is supported by Morgan (1988) who wrote that “the hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (p.12). In a later publication Morgan and Kruegar (1993) argue that the focus group is a valuable method for people who have “historically had limited power and influence” (p.15). However, it is important to allow also for individual participation as these students were not a homogeneous group. There is a possibility of conducting further one to one interviews with the students after consulting with the focus groups. In order to gain an overview of varying students’ perspectives, I encouraged a variety of students to participate, with respect to age and gender. A guiding factor on the decisions about data collection was consideration of the amount of time that students were likely to give to this research project. The focus group interviews were conducted over one week. The participants were all informed regarding ethical issues including confidentiality prior to the interviews. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes, and the interviews were transcribed and analyzed.

Pre-interview surveys in Chinese were conducted prior to focus group interview for the participants to prepare for their answers to avoid miscommunication. There were nine questions regarding the participants’ introduction and learning experiences of 2+2 joint programme in China. The survey was sent to the participants by e-mail two days before their initial focus group interviews. 36 students filled in the survey and returned it prior to their focus group interviews.

The focus group interviews were conducted in English. There were 10 groups in total: four male only groups; three female only groups; and three mixed-gender groups. The groups were allocated by the participants themselves. Prior to the focus group interviews, the participants had general idea of what kinds of questions will be asked in the interview based upon pre-interview survey, thus seemed ready for the interview.

## **3. Findings and Discussion**

### **3.1 Reasoning to join this program**

Willingness to join the 2+2 international joint program emerged from both external and internal aspects.

### 3.1.1 Internal aspects

Most of the participants believe that the program constitutes an opportunity to go overseas and experience different cultural perspectives.

- Chance to see different style of education, different ideas and very good opportunity to see the outside of the world and to see the very different culture from China. (Group 10, Participant 3)

Additionally, the participants position New Zealand in a superior light, believing that the quality of education provided there surpasses domestic offerings.

- I would like to go abroad to further education. To have better education. (Group 2, Participant 1)
- ... I wanna to study in New Zealand to give advanced education. (Group 9, Participant 1)
- I go, I decided to go to New Zealand because I want to go abroad. I want to see outside of the world and study more knowledge. Going there it is a chance. (Group 10, Participant 2)

“Advanced education”, “better education”, and “more knowledge” mentioned by the participants can be related to what many researchers refer to as the so-called “knowledge society”. As human capital theory suggests, individuals invest in education and training to enhance their knowledge and skills. In addition, the relationship between education and economy has constantly assumed a greater significance (Hegarty, 2015). Thus having advanced education is a favorable investment.

- I want to be have more extra knowledges. I think in China the knowledges we learn about the management is quite limited. The different knowledges means maybe quite beneficial for my future. (Group 3, Participant 1)

Human capital also refers to “human beings invest[ing] in themselves, by means of education, training, or other activities, which raises their future income by increasing their lifetime earnings.” (Woodhall, 1997, p13 cited in Morgan, 2011).

- I think it is good way to invest my life for, and get a lots of experience to give in overseas and I think there are more chances I can get good job in China. (Group 3, Participant 4)
- This program give us opportunity to go abroad and study different knowledge. I can also go to New Zealand. Maybe it is a experience for my um... job. (Group 5, Participant 1)

- Join this program can go abroad to study, and I can learn more knowledge for job. (Group 5, Participant 3)

More specifically, developing management knowledge whilst simultaneously strengthening English proficiency is an efficient use of time and therefore a sound investment for their future.

- I think learning English is the main purpose I go abroad, and it is more need for a person who has another language, more needed... If I want to find a good job, I must learn this skill. (Group 2, Participant 4)

However, heightened English proficiency is not the only pay-off associated with the program, it is also a vehicle to experience and understand Western culture. Vavrus (2002) supports this, arguing that education is a primary institution through which to understand multiculturalism.

- Reason why I go to New Zealand is because I want to have experience of spending abroad, and learn the language and western culture. (Group 9, Participant 4)

In addition, learning English is a tool that facilitates learning different perspectives.

- I want to get some oversea experience. And I think the learning in English is another way to think about one things. I want to get some other style of thinking. (Group 3, Participant 2)

Nevertheless adopting different perspectives cannot be gained solely through language acquisition, but rather is a consequence of human interaction.

- I want to go abroad to touch the other culture and people, and make some foreign friends. (Group 9, Participant 2)

### **3.1.2 External aspects**

The following are external aspects of reasoning discussed by the participants. Firstly, one of the participants provided an interesting comment as follows;

- I did not think I will study abroad, but it is also a chance and I think I may have this opportunity to have change my life, and learn more about the world. (Group 10, Participant 4).

The question begs that if an individual did not expect to study abroad, what factors were responsible for their presence in the program? Upon probing, the answer was quickly identified as parental influence. In this, group 10's participant 4 was not alone:

- My father said today to get a good job in this society, competition is sensitive. They say that you go to abroad to study, may have good opportunity when we come back, so I choose this program. (Group 4, Participant 3)

- My mother think ... Because in China, it is low level and they need some kind of people know international business. So my mother said it is promising and you take this course, you will get more better future. (Group 6, Participant 1)

Thus internal aspects of reasoning to join this program (the prospect of a better future) also coalesce from parents' perspectives. Another important parental external aspect of reasoning relates to tuition fees;

- The main reason I choose this program is because my dad said. Because high tuition fee. He think high tuition fee equal to the good quality of education. (Group 4, Participant 1)

This perspective emerged from the participant's father. The presumption that higher tuition fees equates to the quality education can be seen as a result of price-quality relationship. However there were also different perspectives regarding the relative cost of the program made by the following participants;

- Because fees is much lower in New Zealand when go abroad. And we can spend two years here. And in that case we have best time to go to New Zealand. Chinese fees and life, money spend to support out life is much lower, so my father whether I would like to choose this program, I said yes. (Group 6, Participant 4)
- I have no choice. I decided to go to another university to apply for another university, it will give me more time, one or two more years. My family and me think this will just think about fee. (Group 9, Participant 3).

As temporal costs are not sunk, they become relevant factors in decision calculus in addition to financial costs;

- ...it can save us money and time (Group 1, Participant 1)
- My parents think it is suitable for me, if we join this program, it will save money for me, because we study in Chinese two years and go abroad, it will save so much money. (Group 8, participant 1)

Beyond financial and temporal advantages, other characteristics of the 2+2 international joint program also appear to be attractive to the participants;

- We can have opportunity to go abroad, and it's the program with two schools may be more better for us. (Group 1, Participant 3)
- I think two of the colleges are quite good and this program is quite good for me. And can stay in two years here and catch the different culture and different school. (Group 8, Participant 3)

Furthermore, this program provides an opportunity for the participants to go to New Zealand together. This makes some of the participants feel safe and comfortable;

- If we join this program, we can go together more safe than you go by yourself. (Group 7, participant 1)

Furthermore, the participants joined not only because of their parents, but also as a result of national examinations and the university's decision;

- The school choose me to this program (Group 3, participant 1)
- This school require grade of 510... so to enter this program was easy. (Group 6, participant 2)
- After the national examinations, we have a chance to choose which university we would like to go, and we, my family saw this program and my parents told me that it is a good chance. (Group 10, participant 3)

A secondary question therefore arose: do the participants really wish to go to New Zealand to study?

- I was forced to go to New Zealand, because I want to go to other countries such as Canada or England. (Group 9, Participant 3).
- ...most place I want to go is Canadian, not New Zealand. (Group 6, Participant 4)

At this point the author enquired about why they studied in this program when their desire was to go to Canada or England. A chief reason was related to the majors offered by the program;

- I am interested in this program. I am interested in Management. [other program] major in Mathematics [sic], and I do not like Mathematics [sic]. (Group 3, participant 3)
- My parents send me to go abroad to study. The course is my interest...I also like learn management, so therefore for me. (Group 2, participant 2)

Having said that, one of the participants decided to withdraw;

- I listen to my father. He said go to abroad, and there are education quality is better than China, but ... I am not going to abroad. Because I heard from a person who come from New Zealand...he said it [New Zealand] is not good place for study. It is good place for living your life. ...they [classmates] think they wasted two years [if you withdrawn from the program now] and money. But I do not think so. Because if you go to, and you do not like it, you will waste more money and more time. I think I will waste one year. But I will live for 60 years and one year is little. (Group 4, Participant 2)

### 3.2 Parental Pressure

70% of the participants' parents work as a manager or own their business. Others included so-called "white color jobs" such as doctors, lawyers, and engineers, as well as bankers, hotel and government employees. Without exception, tuition fees are paid for by the parents.

A few participants commented that they do NOT feel pressure from their parents.

Reason 1: The participants will pay them back in the future;

- No [pressure], because my parents always tell me when I grow older I will pay them back. (Group 7, participant 1)

Reason 2: Family

- I do not feel pressure, because they pay so much money for me to study abroad. Just me to be a people who can quite qualified to survive. I have to repay that way, my tuition money. It is fair, I think. We are neutral trust and neutral family. (Group 6, participant 1)

Reason 3: Parents do not verbally put the participants under pressure.

- I think my parents do not give me any pressure. When I go to the university, they never told me work hard. (Group 4, participant 2)

Even though some of the participants do not feel pressure from their parents, they are still motivated by their parents;

- Not very pressure, because they pay my fees, I feel study for them (Group 5, participant 1)

Direct parental pressure does not seem to be prevalent but indirect parental pressure exists. There may be a link between indirect parental pressure and motivation to study;

- I think my parents do not give any pressure over me. Because when I began to study, I was a top student in my class, and they think I am a good one. So now they can be...seen very confident, but I am not quite qualified. Kind of pressure inside of me, so this kind of pressure become stress and drive me, um...push me hard inside. Of course parents give me some standard, you must be top 1 or top 2 in the class. I should do better. I think this kind of pressure is maybe good for me. (Group 4, participant 1)

High expectations of both students and parents influences the learning process. Students' high academic expectations encourage them to improve their own learning ability. Parental expectations can place pressure on students (McCabe, Butterfield, & Treviño, 2012). Nonetheless, parental pressure plays an important role in student learning in many countries although the ways parents

control their children differs from one society to the next (Sigel, McGillicuddy-DeLisi, & Goodnow, 2014).

- Maybe Chinese culture, parents always work for their children. Usually most of our parents maybe...save money for their children. They can give much money for their children to study. (Group 8, participant 1)

Even though parents paying for their children's education is a cultural issue, realization of the burden places pressure on the participants;

- They [parents] work really hard and to earn more money to let me go abroad, so I have some stress. (Group 10, participant 2)
- I will pressured, I think money is so much for them. (Group 1, participant 1)

But participant 1 justified participant 2 in group 10's comment by indicating;

- Fortunately, we only go to New Zealand for two years and get a bachelor's degree. Compare to other program, four years, so that fees will be more higher. (Group 10, participant 1)

Parental fee payment places the participant under pressure although the severity varies depending upon background and social class. However, this parental pressure tends to motivate the participants to study hard;

- [parental pressure] To make me to work hard. When I think of fee pay so much money to me, I will work hard. (Group 9, Participant 4)
- I think they earn money and...now I do not have ability to pay myself. I think they earn money for use to study. If um...when I get further education in the school, and they pay for me. I feel something appreciate for my parents. (Group 4, participant 3)

Parental pressure motivates the participants to study hard, not only for their parents, but also for their future;

- To work hard and finish education and get a good job (Group 2, participant 1)
- We must study hard. I think my parents are paying so much money for me to study now, they hope I can have a better future. So I should try to develop myself better and have better future. Also in Chinese culture, I should help my parents. (Group 7, participant 2)
- I think also motivation. I feel I have to work very hard. But for my future, for them [parents], and for this money. (Group 8, participant 3)

Furthermore, the participants' motivation reinforces their goal of academic education;

- My final goal is to get a master degree, so I must get um...I had better to get honours in bachelor degree. (Group 10, participant 1).
- ...there is so much pressure, I will study so hard in order to get a degree with honours. (Group 9, participant 3)

Consequently, parental pressure can affect the participant and their motivation positively. However there did appear to be some negative aspects;

- I think I may feel pressure. But I think I make wrong decision. I wan to go abroad, so I choose this program, and I found it is very hard to understand. I also do not know my future. I think my future is not as good as I think. It is pressure. (Group 6, participant 4)

### **3.3 Learning experiences**

The aim of this section was to find out the participants' perspectives on their actual learning experiences in the 2+2 international program.

I think all the problem is based on English. (Group 8, participant 1)

Learning in English is and will always be one of the major difficulties for non-native English speakers studying under the New Zealand education system. This caveat also appeared with the participants in this study. The majority of the participants indicated that they have difficulties with English when they study in China. These problems include listening, speaking, pressure, reading, and learning style.

#### **3.3.1. Listening problems**

- I think language is biggest problem for me, because sometimes I cannot understand what teachers say. (Group 9, participant 4)
- My listening is very poor. So when I am in the class, I have some problem. Sometimes I cannot get point. (Group 9, participant 1)

Additionally, the participants indicated that not only do they not understand the discourse in class, but also tend to misunderstand which creates further problems later on;

- Some of the words that I cannot translate in Chinese very clearly. So when misunderstanding the whole sentences. (Group 5, participant 2)

Another reason why the participants tend to misunderstand was because;

- ...also words in the book very big, and sometimes cannot find it in dictionary. Sometimes English have many meanings, so hard to find actual meaning about it. (Group 5, participant 3)

In an effort to aid understanding, many students resort to using dictionaries in class but doing so is often at the cost of falling behind the lecturer;

- I will find dictionary or ask other people. But by the time, that teacher already talk about another topic. So I lose some knowledges. (Group 5, participant 1)

Speed of delivery has also been cited as a hindering element in understanding;

- In the class the teachers say too quickly and cannot follow him (Group 4, participant 2)

Misunderstanding can also give way to complacency and resignation;

- I listen to him lecture for 20 minutes, I will lose myself. Then to have class sit there until the ending. (Group 6, participant 4)

### **3.3.2. Speaking problems;**

According to the participants, oral English is only a minor problem, and only a few participants mentioned about it;

- I think oral English is not so good, because most of the students are afraid of talking. We all think if I say the wrong words or wrong English sentences, we will be laughed at (Group 2, participant 4).

However, expressing themselves in English tends to be one of major difficulties for the participants;

- It is maybe not so difficult to speak in English or write in English. Most difficult is thinking in English. Because we have traditional way... Chinese thinking. (Group 3, participant 2)

Unfortunately, the participant could not explain exactly what ‘Chinese thinking’ is, however with the interviewer’s probing question, seemed to be able to understand in the way that when one writes or speaks English, they tend to think in Chinese first, then translate into English. The same technique is used when they read English textbooks – translate English into Chinese language to understand. However some of the information is inexorably lost in the translation – leading to situations where the participants may misunderstand the subject matter, or even worse, come to a deep seeded conclusion about the material which is grounded on flawed logic.

- Some of the words and not heard, we translate to Chinese, then we have to understand it in English. That is a bit difficult. (Group 10, participant 3)

### **3.3.3. Pressure;**

- Another problem studying in this program at the partner university is that;

- I think the biggest problem is that we have too much work to do. We have too much pressure. (Group 9, participant 3)

In addition to the parental pressure discussed in the previous section;

- Language problem is very pressure, because my English is very poor also from my middle school to now (Group 9, participant 2)
- In addition to the “language problem pressure”, there is another type of pressure – “time pressure”
- Working and pressure is harder than before, because we have to read English textbook. Lots of text to finish and write. We feel time pressure. (Group 1, Participant 4)
- We need to read a lot of books and to know a lot of information about the book. And sometimes we need a lot of time to read it, and still cannot read the book (Group 2, participant 1).

Thus it can be suggested that “time pressure” is most likely to be caused by reading problems.

- Too many readings materials. We have to read many pages in a short time. (Group 2, participant 4).

#### **3.3.4. Reading problem**

- Too many paragraph to read, so it is difficult (Group 1, participant 1).

“It is difficult,” is because reading textbooks in English is time consuming and reduces their spare time.

- ... we need to spend more time to read and learn this knowledge (Group 1, participant 2)
- We have to work hard and we have less time to play. (Group 9, participant 3)

As a majority of participants suggested, they do not have enough time to read so many materials.

However some participants commented on the reason why they do not have time to read;

- ..maybe the reason is that maybe ... we work at the last minutes. (Group 2, participant 4).
- Sometimes most difficulties is caused by myself I think. Sometimes I think I am too lazy. (Group 4, participant 1)
- Another reason why reading is difficult is because their previous learning experiences differ;
- Too many reading in course made difficult to us. I think Chinese students especially in high school do not have so much reading. Now we have a lot of reading. (Group 10, participant 4)

### 3.3.5. Learning strategy;

Differences between Chinese and New Zealand education systems tend to be one of the problems for the participants to adjust their learning style. Participants noted that under the Chinese system, one need only pass the two major examinations to gain credit. Whereas both internal and external assessments are important in New Zealand;

- Before we only have middle and final test. And we need to just read a book and remember something important. It is enough for you to pass. Now we have to be careful with every quiz, because proportion of final marks. (Group 8, participant 3)

Some researchers indicated that Asian students' learning strategies are based on rote, reproductive, surface, and teacher-centered forms in order to succeed in examinations. Thus these learning strategies lack critical and analytical thinking, as deeper understanding of the curriculum is foregone in the quest of seeking the highest possible mark. This has an enormous effect on discussing and arguing situations (Aitchison & Kalos, 1999; Henshall, 1992; Kubota, 1999; Ramsden, 1992).

- In Chinese education system, it means more reading and more memorizing. But English education system use these theory in practice. (Group 8, participant 1)
- Surface learning approaches intend only to complete the tasks that are pressed upon the student such as filling in a gap in a sentence. It focuses on rote learning for assessments. In addition, surface learning only maintains the learners' knowledge for a short -period of time.
- ... we have to memorize and sit exam to get in [the university]. (Group 4, participant 3)
- [in high school] writing and remember many things. They good university may choose high marks students. (Group 3, participant 1)

It places emphasis externally for the demands of assessments, and is not ostracized from every day life as some facets require the rote memorization of material for human interaction. However the traditional learning strategies in Asia are of practice and of repetition also influences the development of understanding (Smith, Miller, & Crassini, 1998).

- In high school, teachers talk a lots. They will give problem and solve again and again and make sure that we understand. The reason is that we get a good grade in national examinations, so that we can get in good university or colleges. (Group 10, participant 3)

As the Chinese system places a great emphasis on university entry exams, student preparation must be correspondingly great;

- When in high school, work is usually, work load is very heavy. We have to many exercises to do, because we have to pass the exam. In China, if you did not do well this exam, you will go to some university that is not very good. This is about your future. So many students study very hard. (Group 9, participant 3)

That is to say, Chinese high school students do not have a choice with respect to skill development. They need to learn repetitively in order to pass the national examinations to get into a good university.

- I think high school all the students learn the same. They cannot choose major they want to or do not want to study. The teacher some knowledge and you must study. (Group 9, participant 2)

In addition, the roles of high school teachers in the Chinese education system mentioned by the participants were;

1. To provide many exercises to the students;
  - In the high school, teachers will too many works. They will ask us to hand in the next day. (Group 2, participant 2)
2. To provide right answers to the students;
  - In high school, we always waiting for teacher to give us answers. (Group 1, participant 3)
3. To motivate students;
  - In high school, maybe teacher force us to study. (Group 1, participant 1)
  - ... in high school teachers ask us to do something a week. (Group 1, participant 2)

By comparison, the Western education system, including New Zealand, places more emphasis on deep learning than surface learning. Deep and surface learning approaches are generalized to explain students' engagement with learning in higher education (Ramsden, 1992). The deep learning approach aims to understand and maintain assessment. It focuses on the concepts being taught to improve problem-solving skills. It is also used to apply and enhance previous knowledge to new knowledge by casting one's eye from different stand-points in an academic environment as well as every day life.

- I think content of exam is very different. In China, most focus is on remember. But I think in New Zealand most important is to apply to new knowledge and opinion to solve the problem. (Group 8, participant 3)

However Asian universities tend to be different to Western universities;

- ... when they [Chinese high school students] come to university they will not study hard. And so that is the differences between university in China and university in abroad. (Group 9, participant 3)

But regarding participants involved in this program;

- In university, we learn by ourselves. (Group 1, participant 2)
- “we learn by ourselves” can be related to the different role of lecturers in this program;
- ... now teachers always ask me to do it ourselves and apply it to some theories. (Group 1, participant 3)
- Now teachers in class ask to give our feelings. We can see those differences of change. (Group 1, participant 4)
- Overall their previous learning experiences and present experiences can be described as;
- High school, with knowledge by practice. In university we learn knowledge by listening lecturer. (Group 9, participant 4)

#### **4. Conclusion and potential future research**

This study has examined the expectations and experiences of Chinese students involved in a 2+2 international program between two tertiary institutions in New Zealand and China. By doing so, it identifies learning issues that students are faced with and provides opportunities for further research. It has been found that both students and their parents held high expectations of the program, seeing it as superior offering to many domestic alternatives, a chance to improve English skills, and develop both academic and professional skills. Parental influence was found to be significant within the group as all participants’ tuition fees were being shouldered by their parents. Even so, the perceived degree of pressure this placed on the student to perform varied within the group. This raises the possibility of examining the perceived parental pressure against performance, an avenue of enquiry that could also be transferred to Japanese students and cross-analyzed. Whilst expectations were high, the study also found that listening and reading created serious epistemological challenges: misunderstanding and resignation with respect to listening and temporal constraints with respect to reading. Following the progress of these individuals as they develop their proficiency could shed some insight on how they overcome these issues in the future. The study also communicates the realization on the part of students that the two systems value different skills: memorization and recall in the case of China, critical thinking and analytical skills in the case of New Zealand. Once again, a comparison of Chinese to Japanese students could examine whether Japanese students are as able to recognize the differences and a staggered comparison between four groups—those who have attended such programs in Japan and China and those who have not—might uncover some interesting cognitive differences.

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