

PhDs of the UK, Unite! Your Futures Depend on It

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This paper addresses the increasing casualisation of academic labour in higher education and its implications for PhD students in the UK. It will contextualise a recent campaign resulting in the formation of The Postgraduate Workers Association established by a group of PhD students in an attempt to build a collective resistance to the growing exploitation of postgraduate students that teach in UK universities. It is also concerned about the way the competitive marketisation of higher education benefits some institutions and disciplines, particularly at the expense of the ex-polytechnics and the social sciences and humanities. As the future of some universities will be left in jeopardy, the future of social science may depend on its willingness to adapt to the new economic climate and help those most affected by inequalities of the market to develop a more reflexive mode of relating to the social world. Lastly, it questions what consequences the increasing exploitation of PhD student teachers might have on social class hierarchies in academia.

Key Words: Higher Education, Casualisation, Labour Exploitation, Precarity, Doctoral Students' Campaign

Introduction

Participation in higher education in the UK has expanded significantly in recent years. Figures for 2010 reveal that higher education participation rates experienced an all time high of 45 percent in UK universities with 2.49 million students studying in higher education (Universities UK 2011). When higher education began its rapid participation increase in the early 1960s, only one in twenty people went to university (Coughlan 2010). The expansion of higher education in the UK has undergone two rapid waves, the first one in the 1960s and the second one

in the early 1990s. The first expansion coincided with the coming of age of the post-war baby-boomers and the publication of the Robbins Report of 1963 which argued that higher education should not be supply constrained. The early 1990s witnessed a substantial expansion which overlapped the ending of the binary divide between polytechnics and universities and the changing nature of the employment structure which was demanding more highly educated workers (Mayhew et al 2007). The last ten years have seen an even greater expansion with student numbers at UK higher

education institutions increasing by 28 percent for the period between 2000/01 to 2009/10 (Universities UK 2011).

This unsurprisingly has resulted in an increasing number of people undertaking full-time doctoral studies. Today's PhD students are undertaking their education in one of the worst economic crises since The Great Depression. But what does that mean for postgraduate students and universities? Postgraduate students are now being faced with growing pressure to engage in additional low-paid and sometimes unpaid teaching and marking work to enhance their CVs for future employment prospects. Dissatisfied with the acceptability of this practice, a group of PhD students across different universities have joined forces to start a campaign which collectively resists the exploitation of postgraduate students' academic labour and have recently formed The Postgraduate Workers Association (PGWA). It is still in its early days but its aims are simple – to work with University College Union (UCU) and National Union of Students (NUS) in order to ensure fair conditions for research students employed by UK universities. The PGWA believe that students who work in higher education are professionals like any other, deserving of the respect, pay and conditions which should also be afforded to their non-student colleagues. As such postgraduate students are not free or cheap la-

bour to be exploited, or to be used to undercut established academic colleagues' pay and conditions. The PGWA plans to fight for postgraduate student workers in the higher education sector to be given the same entitlements as other workers in universities including: comprehensive written contracts, fair pay for every hour worked, holiday and sick pay, trade union representation, equal, free access to the resources they need to perform their job and no threats, or implicit threats, of academic repercussions for matters of employment and so on.

PGWA also believes that research students, as early career researchers, are entitled to adequate and fair access to paid teaching opportunities to develop this aspect of their academic skills. Recruitment practices must be fair, transparent and open. Of course, this is an important point because our brief research in the issue has shown that when some students feel they cannot get paid teaching work, they have taken up unpaid positions for the work experience. The growing struggles that PhD and early career researchers endure comes at a time of increasing marketisation of higher education, escalating commodification of university products and the looming fear of privatisation of the 'public' university. Therefore, perhaps PhD students should be doing all they can to promote themselves in the job market – including taking unpaid teaching work? Or does this

simply become another strategy that contributes to the maintenance and reproduction of social inequalities and elitist social class domination in higher education?

Marketisation of Higher Education

Since the 1980s, higher education has moved away from a social democratic policy-making model and towards a public sector management and quasi-market model of education. The current neo-liberal free market economics of the British education system should be located in this wider context of extensive social and economic restructuring of policy which has been experienced throughout the world (Ball 2003 and Pierson 1998). From the 1970s Britain underwent a restructuring of social forces which saw amongst other things an ideological shift from Keynesianism to neo-liberalism. This not only resulted in a restructuring of the education system but also the occupational sector. The Western world experienced a downgrading and global outsourcing of manufacturing and a move towards the 'knowledge economy' in which its economy became more reliant on knowledge-based industries such as education, training and research. Such a shift in the world of work has also resulted in the increased participation of women workers in the labour market and the growth of part-time, insecure employment, particularly in the teaching and caring professions (Giddens 2001).

The quasi-market creates a system in which patients, parents, passengers and so on, become consumers of a product while the producers are forced to compete with each other (Maclure 1998). The increasing individualisation and the regime of choice in education produce a number of anxieties particularly with regards to middle class social reproduction. It also intensifies the relationship between the structure of the education system and the structure of class reproduction, as middle class reproduction is no longer assured unless accompanied by careful planning and consideration (Ball 2006)

This neo-liberal free market educational system and the extensive social and economic restructuring that has taken place as a consequence of the forces of modern globalisation and international competitiveness have created new markets that require new consumerist relationships. Subjected to market competition, universities are managed like businesses with the increasing commodification of university practices and products. This is so the student can ensure that standards are set, measurable, and comparable when deciding where to maximise their investment in their education, be that in the national or international market (Smyth and Shacklock 2004). As the production of knowledge becomes commodified, this requires a convention to measure the quality of that product. In the UK,

the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) was introduced in 1986 under the Conservative government to act as an evaluative system to assess, amongst other things, research productivity (Tomlinson 2005). Each department within a university gets a quality score. It is these measures of 'excellence' that can help attract students, as well as much needed private research funding.

Universities themselves need to be located within the structural relations of power as they position their own institution within the education market and against other universities, in which they are becoming increasingly pitted against each other in their fight for survival (Naidoo 2004). This situation becomes all the more complex in the British context, as the binary system was abolished in 1992 and polytechnics were granted university status and independence identical to older universities. However, status and funding differences remain due to historic context (Robbins 2006). Will it be the elite universities that survive at the expense of the old polytechnics? Only time will tell. However, with a three-year university course costing up to £27,000 in tuition fees alone from September 2012, early signs do not bode well for post 1992-universities. The projected figures show that many of them will experience a decrease of more than ten percent in undergraduate student numbers this coming academic year of 2012-2013 (Vasagar 2012).

The commercialisation of knowledge also leads to struggles between disciplines as well as internal battles; between different schools, different departments, the academics themselves, and so on and so forth (Burawoy 2011).

Students are embedded in complex decision-making settings when choosing not only which university to attend, but what to study. Universities are subject to national and international ranking systems connected to the idea of excellence. One of the most well known ranking systems is the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES). Students and parents are increasingly using this system for comparing and ranking their choice of university in order to ensure that they get the 'best value' for their money. But the decisions become more complicated as within each university different schools and departments are given separate marks of 'excellence' (Burawoy 2011a). The education market and the individualist mode of social reproduction require that students plan and reflect upon their strategies for advantages in the education system. As Stephen J. Ball (2006) states: 'In the education market you can never know enough but often know too much' (Ball 2006, 266). Such perceived 'risk' of making the 'right' decision is likely to widen divisions and hierarchies in higher education. Students are worried by the prospect of indebtedness and want to ensure that the

degree they obtain is valued by prospective employers. Demand theory suggests that when prices rise, the consumer's tastes and choices alter in accordance (Leslie and Brinkman 1987). Figures from the Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) reveal that not only has there been an overall decrease in applications to study at university, but a variation in choice of discipline as well. Humanities and social sciences are the worst affected, whilst Medicine experiences a relatively small decline in applications (Vasagar 2012). So how are universities going to deal with the issue? Universities will search for more strategies to replace public funding cuts as well as save money. Michael Burawoy (2011b) suggests that universities might do this in three ways. The first involves universities collaborating with the private sector, the second is raising tuition fees and the third strategy is increasing the use of casualised staff.

In a time of economic recession and budget cuts, the social sciences in 'lower' ranking universities tend to be increasingly disadvantaged as they are often less likely to find large corporate donors to sponsor their research on the same scale as the medical sciences or engineering. Furthermore, many higher-ranking universities' social science departments have guarded against public funding cuts by having ESRC studentship funding and status available by becoming Doctoral Training

Centres. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has only granted 21 Doctoral Training Centres (DTCs) (involving 45 institutions) in the UK to the universities which they see as being able to deliver the highest quality training provision. The majority of those recognised as DTCs are Russell Group universities (Holmwood 2011). Significantly, no ex-polytechnics were granted DTC status. DTC status will help universities to attract the 'best' students and the ones most likely to be awarded funding as well as drawing in top academics looking to supervise high achieving PhD students and thereby increasing the output of high ranking research for the universities, while maintaining the university's position in the hierarchy of institutions.

The second above-mentioned strategy of raising tuition fees was introduced by New Labour, which argued the need for an overhaul of the funding basis of higher education. It introduced tuition fees in the wake of the Dearing Report of 1997, abolished remaining maintenance grants and expanded the income contingent loan scheme. It also brought us the Higher Education Act of 2004, concerned with the implications of mass higher education and of the role of higher education in the global economy, as New Labour famously stated that it wanted to increase the proportion of students going into higher education by fifty percent (Tomlinson

2005). Furthermore, the Browne Review in 2010 concluded that the cap on student fees should be lifted, that students should pay the main proportion of the actual cost of a degree and it should be the universities themselves who decide what to charge (Vasagar and Shepherd 2010).

Casualisation of Academic Labour

The third above-mentioned strategy is already in full swing. The higher education sector is increasingly reliant upon casual staff, as fiscally constrained universities look for the most efficient and cost-effective way to run. A report by University and College Union (UCU) estimated that there was a record-number of 77,000 hourly paid teachers in higher education in the UK for the period 2009-10. Universities are dealing with cuts of up to forty per cent in their teaching budgets with humanities and social science worst affected (Vasagar 2010). Thus, the salary gaps between and within the universities widen, the working conditions decrease, feelings of insecurity increase and academic labour seems to be more open to exploitation than ever before.

Of course, the increasing trend towards the casualisation of labour has been happening for some time in all sectors of industry, not just in higher education. Early in 2012,

Britain was gripped by a backlash to the controversial ‘workfare’ experience scheme, a ‘voluntary’ programme in which unemployed young people would do unpaid work in some low-skilled service sector job while still receiving their job-seeker allowance (Topping 2012). Then there is the growing use of unpaid internships by employers, in which young interns circulate on a conveyor belt simply replacing each other and endlessly looking for the one placement that will lead to that paid job. Is it really surprising that universities have jumped on this bandwagon? Just as ‘workfare’ was met with a hostile response from the public, postgraduate students and early career researchers are also going on the counterattack over the escalating abuse of their academic labour.

One such response has been the establishment of a campaign by a group of PhD students –one that I am myself involved in – uniting across different universities in an attempt to build a collective resistance to the economic exploitation of postgraduate students who work as lecturers. After our first conference held in May in London, we democratically elected to form The Postgraduate Workers Association (PGWA). Our aims and goals have been outlined above. But one of the most important things we want to do is help organise ourselves as postgraduate students into a mass, democratic movement that fights

this exploitation working with organisations, including UCU and other trade unions, NUS and student unions. We also want to assist localised movements across UK universities and help them in their own institution as each case might have unique differences. As such we are calling for reports from across the country about experiences of organising postgraduates that teach at different universities.

When we question the future of social science, perhaps we might want to think about how sociological knowledge is increasingly beginning to be appropriated for a variety of campaigns in retaliation to the current climate of austerity? This is also being reflected in the anger that people feel because of the challenging situations they find themselves in – from the wave of larger-scale occupation movements to sit-ins or, for example, a small scale campaign to save the local library. What emerges with this opposition is the interaction between the commentators of the brutality of the market and the communities which feel its impact. Burawoy (2005a) argues that post-war sociology operated in a period of state protectionism from the market and that social science was concerned with issues emerging with the welfare state. However, we are now living in an era of ‘third wave’ marketisation and the state no longer offers the security it once did. Therefore, sociology must recognise this and engage in the politi-

cal sphere by supporting people to develop a reflexive and theoretical mode of relating to their world. This is what Burawoy (2005a) refers to as public sociology.

What about the future of sociology? Might it actually be to defend civil society against neo-liberal political rationality that attempts to individualise responsibility for the problems created by global economic forces? After all, sociology from its very beginning embodied a radical reorganisation of social relations. Maybe a more engaged social science is not really as new as we might think? The philosophers of the Enlightenment chanted a revolutionary rhetoric of a new class struggle against the ideology of the divine right and natural god-given order of social relations (Hobsbawm 1975). C. Wright Mills was one of the original campaigners of public sociology viewing professional sociology as ‘meaningless abstracted empiricism’ (Burawoy 2005b, 33). Alvin W. Gouldner (1970) argued that it is not just knowledge and technical skills that sociologists require; they also need ‘courage to compromise their careers on behalf of an idea’ (Gouldner 1970, 504). The fact that sociology challenges the existing framework and is accused of being too radical is not necessarily a problem, and in truth many would argue it is not radical enough. Sociology originally began to help spread the ideas of self determination and change the world, now often it is

used to conserve the very thing it sought to change (Burawoy 2005b). As Gouldner suggests, vulgar careerism is wide spread amongst the sociological profession and institutions. According to Gouldner (1970) sociology needs to be more reflexive and this reflexivity requires a radical character. Sociology has become too detached from the larger society – the object of its study. Universities, themselves once a place of intellectual freedom, are now part of the welfare state and as Gouldner (1970) puts it ‘sociology has become dangerously dependent upon the very world it has pledged to study objectively’ (Gouldner 1970, 512). To be a radical sociologist is not just to be critical, it involves a total praxis. Reflexive sociology is a work ethic that requires sociologists not to betray themselves in order to fit ‘neatly into the standardised requirements of his professional role’ (Gouldner 1970, 505).

So how might sociology be instrumental in defending civil society? First of all, it needs to acknowledge that public sociology cannot exist in isolation from other forms of sociology, outlined by Burawoy (2004) as ‘the Division of Sociological Labor’ consisting of four types of sociology: professional, policy, critical and public. Secondly, social scientists must become reflexive in what they do. They should investigate the causes and consequences of whichever issue they are dealing with and recognise that their interest in a better so-

ciety reaches beyond the university. Public sociology needs to connect with the people whose interests are best served by its knowledge (Burawoy 2005a).

However, this is more easily said than done given the commodification and privatisation of academic knowledge in the university. So perhaps it might be best to start with the actual university itself. Take for example our campaign and The Postgraduate Workers Association. I suppose like many campaigners I was somewhat affected by the issue personally. I was also the PhD representative for my school and was concerned about the financial difficulties PhD students encountered when trying to support themselves through their studies, as well as what resources a university offers for the career development of those students. Recent figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show that 32,735 students were doing an arts and humanities doctorate in the UK in 2011 (Tobin 2011). An estimated three out of ten full-time PhD students will not complete their doctorate within seven years and only one in three part-time PhD students will be likely to submit a thesis within six years (MacLeod 2005). Undoubtedly, the ‘right-wing’ press associates such statistics to the ‘declining’ standards of PhD students and holds the university responsible for not admitting the ‘right’ kind of student, accusing the university of seeing international students as

'cash cows' (see Paton 2008).

Nonetheless, universities need to recognise the value and expertise of casual teaching staff, including PhD students and the contribution they make to teaching. In the United States, universities are reliant on low-paid PhD researchers, postdocs and casual staff, often known as the 'ugly underworld of academia'. It was once expected that a PhD student would tolerate such conditions as a form of delayed gratification, as they would gain a good academic job later on. However, the struggles that early career researchers¹ are increasingly finding themselves in suggest an even more extended deferral of job satisfaction. Indeed, this might be reflected in the rise of PhD teachers' unions throughout the USA, which includes private universities. Yet, many of the elite institutions have been harder to infiltrate as many faculties argue that PhD students who teach are simply apprentices and should not have the same entitlements as workers (The Economist 2010).

There is also a broader concern about how the increased use of casualised lecturers may interact with the institutional responsibilities for the quality of the learning experience for the student. Commonly casualised staff do not have the same facilities as full time lecturing staff, including the use of office space making it difficult to arrange student contact hours. The issue seems even more central with stu-

dents paying higher tuition fees, which is likely to make them more consumer-orientated in their university and course choice, as well as more demanding about the quality of the teaching that they receive. Recently Liam Burns, President of the National Union of Students, stated that the standard of teaching seminars delivered by postgraduate students needs to be improved because of higher tuition fees (Boffey 2012). PhD students working as teachers face similar concerns, aware of the increased expectations that undergraduates will bring with them and the intensified scrutiny they are likely to be under because of the increased fees. Another issue is that many universities will offer some type of teacher training, but will not pay for the PhD students to gain a formal teaching qualification. Undergraduate students are often observant in the conditions and treatment of PhD students who teach. This has left PhD students feeling vulnerable. However, the university could address this by regarding PhD student teachers and casual staff as valuable members of the teaching team by not treating them as free or cheap labour to be exploited, or to be used to undercut their colleagues' pay and conditions, by also offering them the same pay and conditions as other established full time professionals.

A recent graduate teaching assistant (GTA) pay survey carried out by the British Postgraduate Philosophy

Association at 28 different university philosophy departments across the UK and Ireland revealed one of the biggest problems was being paid for the actual hours GTAs taught. Many GTAs were paid for the hours they taught and received no additional pay for preparation or marking and no additional holiday pay. Once their hourly wage was divided between the actual hours worked it turned out that many were working below the UK minimum wage of £7.20 per hour. At one particular university that remains unnamed in the survey, it was exposed that the average GTA received in real terms for the hours they worked just £4.79 per hour (Rowland 2012). Our own PGWA brief research² revealed that often PhD students³ are asked to teach on modules in which they are currently doing empirical research and have a large knowledge base on the subject. Postgraduates who work as teachers usually bring a large amount of energy and passion into their job as they are not weighed down with the more bureaucratic matters of the job that more established staff members have to deal with.

Paid teaching experience is a valuable source of income for PhD students, as well as being helpful in future employment. But if this is badly paid or not paid at all, why are PhD students doing it? Of course, this has just been answered: experience. Teaching experience is being sold as a major addition to PhD

students' CVs for future employment prospects. Many universities encourage PhD students to take on teaching work – so much so that some universities have started to 'outsource' their PhD student teachers. Nearby colleges and other universities often look for additional teaching staff from each other. In some situations, PhD students travel far distances often incurring expensive travel costs just to gain the experience. Then, at many universities bursary and scholarship students are expected to teach or work in some capacity for their faculty on an unpaid or reduced amount. This particularly affects international students who might receive a bursary to cover only the cost of their fees. They are then tied into a contractual agreement with the university in which they undertake this exploitative labour, reducing the time they might otherwise have had to earn money in other types of employment to support themselves financially.

Please do not misunderstand; PhD students often want to teach, and some universities have said because of the funding cuts and decreased enrolments there will be no teaching work available to PhD students from September 2012. Many universities have come up with several solutions to the issue. Some universities are assigning teaching work as 'part of the course' even to the point of getting students enrolled in a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE)

to teach undergraduates for free as part of their placements. Other universities are cutting wages for PhD students and increasing their work load. At one institution, PhD students claim to be fighting a pay cut of over fifty percent by their own calculation. And, of course, some universities are simply increasing the class sizes and workloads for full-time established lecturers and not making teaching work available for PhD students. So what of the PhD students who feel that teaching experience is essential as part of their career development? Well, they can gain experience by teaching for free to enhance their CVs and it seems that some overstretched lecturers are only too keen to oblige. Indeed, some PhD students were not happy about a campaign that they saw as dictating what others can do and what they believe to be denying other students the opportunity to gain teaching experience on an unpaid basis.

However, every action has a consequence and no more so than in higher education, which acts as a powerful means for the reproduction and maintenance of social inequalities. By those PhD students who can afford to work for free doing so, they are consciously or unconsciously supporting a strategy of reproduction. Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski (1978) argued that when there was a change in the structure of the education system, the strategies of reproduction by the dominant

classes also altered so as to protect their positions in the class hierarchy. The restructuring of the economic field creates a change in the mode of appropriation of social and cultural capital, in which the dominant classes maximise the education system as an instrument of reproduction. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, there has been a 23 percent increase in people undertaking arts and humanities doctorates in the UK in the last ten years (Tobin 2011). Educational qualifications have become an essential requisition of economic and cultural capital in today's society, therefore increasing the number of people gaining qualifications to succeed in the labour market. As such, those in dominant positions in the class structure search for new strategies to counteract those from other social groups orienting themselves towards the same goals (Bourdieu and Boltanski 1978, 218).

PhD students working for free simply allows the most financially able people to take up these unpaid job 'opportunities'. This not only affects the livelihood and chances of completion for other struggling PhD students, but also helps to guarantee occupational success in the future through social networks and enhanced CVs, masking the social class inequalities that operate in the world of academia. What is more, PhD students should also consider the consequences that working for free will have on those members of

teaching staff that are essentially being undercut. Several academics have contacted the campaign to say that many of them are working on short-term contracts from one semester to the next, and in some cases have been doing so for as long as eight years even though this is illegal. They are increasingly finding it hard to find paid teaching work because universities are using PhD students on an unpaid basis. Although some academic staff might be tempted to use PhD students willing to work for free to relieve their increasing work load, the staff might in the process be opening up the lecturing profession to exploitation by university management. The Postgraduate Workers Association stands in solidarity with, not against, our colleagues and fellow students and we aim to unite with academic staff to form a democratic movement that fights to advance our interests cutting across all societal divides of social class, gender and ethnicity, using every appropriate method, including industrial action, protest, non-violent direct action, and institutional negotiation and lobbying. PGWA supports fair pay, pensions and conditions for all workers. We oppose fees and the marketisation and privatisation of education. We support action taken to advance these principles, in this country and abroad. PGWA is planning on collaborating with UCU anti-casualisation committee to help raise awareness of the job insecurity, worsening

employment conditions, the lack of occupational sick pay and the insufficient, or sometimes lack of office space that fixed-term and hourly paid staff are fighting just as post-graduate students are (PGWA 2012).

Conclusion

In the current economic climate, the fiscally constrained university is under increased pressure to make cuts and save money. However, this started because of the neo-liberal processes and market competition that universities have found themselves in since the 1980s. Such ruthless market competition might have severe effects on the future of some universities, notably, the ex-polytechnics as students' educational consumer choices intensify. Universities strive for more imaginative ways to make cutbacks – including the increased use of casualised and unpaid PhD student teaching staff – and academic labour seems to be more exploited than ever before. So should PhD students be doing all they can to enhance their CVs for future employment opportunities? It seems that PhD students might be mistaken in thinking that what is essentially exploitative labour will lead to a well-paid secure job once they have completed their studies, as they might just find themselves competing against other PhD students teaching for free! It appears that the purpose of social science also needs to alter in rela-

tion to the current context it finds itself in. This may well be to support those whose interests are best served by its knowledge.

The Postgraduate Workers Association is currently looking for people who want to get involved in this campaign either at a local university level or a national level assisting with the main organising duties. If you are interested in the campaign or the associated issue please contact us at postgraduate.worker@gmail.com. We are especially interested in hearing people's experiences and how they might be organising to resist this type of exploitation at their own university and are currently putting out a call for people to write pieces about this for our blog: <http://postgraduateworker.wordpress.com/>. You can find us on Facebook at: <http://www.facebook.com/#!/PGWorkers>. We are also planning a national conference in the autumn of 2012 to help raise awareness of the issue of postgraduate worker's exploitation and our campaign and will be having a Postgraduate block at the NUS national demonstration this autumn.

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Endnotes

¹ The issue of the casualisation of Higher Education and early career researchers is currently being researched by Dr Kirsten Forkert (University of East Anglia) with Dr Bridget Conor (Kings College London) but is not available for reference at the time of writing this.

² The research we undertook was of very small scale and basically involved putting out a call for experiences to postgraduate students who contacted us (as well as academics) with their stories. Therefore, the research has very little generalizability and validity. However, as the PGWA, one of the things we want to do is get the NUS and UCU to carry out more systemic research on the issue.

³ PhD students were encouraged to contact the campaign and share their experiences in order to get a better idea of the practices PhD students were experiencing. All participants were assured that their identity and their university's identity would be kept anonymous.

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