The Practice of Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions in Assessing the Quality of Education: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative analysis on the practice of HEIs in assessing the quality of education. Despite the relentless effort made to include several more institutions, the study was finally confined to only two institutions: Kotebe College of Teacher Education (KCTE) and St. Mary's University College (SMUC) due to some factors. Therefore, the study draws conclusions on and makes recommendations to only these two institutions. Included in the data gathering process were department heads of the two institutions, the Dean of Kotebe College of Teacher Education and the President of St. Mary's University College.

A set of questionnaires, which had different contents according to the specified objectives, was distributed to 6 department heads in each institution. To gather detailed information about the activities being carried out by these institutions to assess the quality of education, thus managing to maintain its quality, an interview was held with the Dean and the President of KCTE and SMUC, respectively. In addition, the study was backed up by evaluation of documents. Quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data indicate that SMUC's institutional assessment practice is far better than that of KCTE. Yet, both are expected to improve their practice in some respect.

The findings of the study are expected to provide a better understanding of the practice of the institutions in terms of carrying out institutional quality assessment, thus benefiting students, instructors, department Heads, Deans, and Presidents of HEIs, the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Assurance Agency (HERQAA), potential employers and the community at large.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

More than ever before, Ethiopia seems to relish the proliferation of higher education institutions (HEIs) all over the country. Both public and private HEIs are increasing in number from time to time. However, one basic question needs to be properly addressed in line with the ambitious upsurge of HEIs: maintaining the quality of education. In other words, besides the expansion of HEIs, striving for the provision of quality education to citizens should be an early and fundamental concern to react to.

According to The World Bank, "Many countries that experienced a doubling or tripling of tertiary enrollments and increased participation rates for young people in recent decades have seen the negative effects of rapid expansion on quality" (2002:61). The World Bank and UNESCO also strengthen this: "... Expansion [of HEIs], public and private, has been unbridled, unplanned, and often chaotic. The results – deterioration in average quality, ..." (2000:83). The World Bank (2002) proves that public higher education institutions in developing nations have shown poor quality of education. Ethiopia may not be a nation to escape such a consequence.

There are research indications that prove the declining quality of education in the Ethiopian HEIs. Amare (1986) cited in Bekalu and Maru (2004), Damtew (2006) are a few to mention. Lots of complaints are also heard from different people in different walks of life. It is not uncommon to hear employers and educators blaming Ethiopian HEIs students for lacking the necessary skills and knowledge after leaving their respective institutions after graduation (Amare and Temechew (2002) and Esayas (2001) in Bekalu and Maru 2004). Asserting people's mistrust over private HEIs in Ethiopia, Wondwosen (2003) describes that people assume Ethiopian private HEIs as "diploma mills" and "certificate shops".

One of the best ways to enhance the quality of education is carrying out regular institutional assessment on the quality of education.

However, such a regular and premeditated quality assessment does not seem to exist in almost all of the institutions in our country. This is, therefore, an attempt to find out what HEIs are doing regarding assessing the quality of education.

1. 2. Objectives of the Study

This study mainly aimed to investigate the actions being taken by institutions of higher learning to assess the quality of education. By so doing, it attempted to:

- > compare and contrast the activities being carried out by the institutions to assess the quality of education;
- > compare and contrast the views that the institutions in each category have towards quality assessment;
- > see if it is possible to forward some speculative recommendations.

1. 3. Design of the Study

The study was meant to include 8 HEIs in Ethiopia: four public and four private. However, due to bureaucratic procedures and some other extraneous factors which resulted in the researcher's vain attempt to collect data from all institutions initially intended to be the subject, the study, at last, got confined to only two HEIs: Kotebe College of Teacher Education (KCTE) and St. Mary's University College (SMUC) which are public and private, respectively. Therefore, the study draws conclusions on and makes recommendations to only these two institutions. Included in the data gathering process were department heads of the two institutions, the Dean of KCTE and the President of SMUC.

A set of questionnaire, which had different contents according to the specified objectives, was distributed to 6 department heads of 6 institutions of which only two institutions filled in and returned. The questionnaire had both open- and close-ended question types. While all of the respondents from SMUC filled in the questionnaire and returned, only half of the respondents from KCTE got it back after filling it out.

Note that none of the respondents from KCTE reflected on the open-ended questions whereas all of the respondents from SMUC made their own list of activities that the institution has been and is doing to maintain the quality of education. To gather detailed information about the activities being carried out, interview was held with the Dean and the President of KCTE and SMUC, respectively. In addition, the study was backed up by evaluation of pertinent documents.

The data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The former was used to analyze the data collected through the close-ended items while the latter was used for all data obtained through open-ended items of the instruments and evaluation of documents.

1. 4. Expected Outcome

This was an investigation aimed at finding out the practice of individual institutions in self-assessment. The findings of the study, therefore, hopefully benefit students – the potential beneficiaries –, instructors, department Heads, Deans, and Presidents of HEIs, the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Assurance Agency (HERQAA), potential employers and the community at large.

1. Literature Review

"Self-evaluation must be a constant practice in all universities" (Vlasceanu and Barrows 2004:37). At times, however, quality assurance is wrongly assumed to be the task of HERQAA whose chief focus has been on giving accreditation to private HEIs. This office makes a survey on the quality of higher education, when a private HEI requests it for accreditation or renewal of accreditation, which most often takes place at as long as a three-year interval after the offering of the pre-accreditation or accreditation. It is only recently that HERQAA announced its preparation to carry out quality audit (Quality Matters 2006).

Individual institutions have the responsibility to regularly assess the quality of education they are offering (Gonzalez and Wagenear 2003). European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2005) makes the following list of self-evaluation criteria.

Despite the massive quality assessment criteria and areas, this study focused on the following because they appear to be somehow inclusive and sensitive areas that need due attention of the institutions.

2.1. Policy and procedures for Quality Assurance

In order for a certain HEI to ensure the quality of its programs, it needs to have a policy and associated procedures which would provide it with a framework that is helpful to monitor the effectiveness of its quality assurance system. Committing itself to the development of a culture which recognizes the importance of quality, and quality assurance, its work should be a major concern for a HEI.

2.2. Monitoring and Periodic Review of the Programs

One way institutions can maintain the quality of education is to possess formal mechanisms for the periodic review and monitoring of their programs. This is likely to boost the confidence of students and other stakeholders in the institutions.

2.3. Quality assurance of Teaching Staff

Since the teacher is "the single most important learning resource available to students", checking the performance of the teaching staff is worth its weight in gold. To this effect, institutions should have mechanisms that help them to see whether or not the teaching staff are qualified and competent to do the job. It is quite necessary to ensure that the staff appointment and promotion procedures include a means of making certain that all new staff members have at least the minimum necessary level for competence.

2.4. Learning Resources and Student Support

Students substantiate their learning with a range of resources. Institutions should therefore make sure that the resources available are adequate and appropriate for each program offered.

Learning resources includes libraries, computing facilities, tutors, and advisors. Periodic monitoring, review and improvement of the effectiveness of these support services need to be given due attention.

2.5. Information Systems

Effective quality assurance begins with institutional self-knowledge. This can be achieved by collecting, analyzing and using relevant information. Doing this helps institutions to identify their strengths and weaknesses.

2.6. Employers' Role

Damtew (2006) strongly comments, quality of education gets well away when "... engaging a host of stakeholders" are managed to remain compatible with the "expansion and development [of HEIs]." Potential employers should be involved in the assessment process to enhance the quality of education.

2. Major Findings and Analysis

This section presents the major findings identified in accordance with the objectives specified in the earlier part of the paper and the analysis of the study.

3.1. Quality Assurance Body

Table 1. Department heads' response on quality assurance body

THE INSTITUTION I WORK FOR:	YES		NO		UNDE	CIDED	TOTAL	
rok:	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC
has an independent quality assurance body.	-	5	2	-	1	1	3	6

Whereas KCTE does not have a quality assurance body, SMUC has. The figures above, the interview result and the document observation indicate that SMUC has recently established a Quality Assessment Council (QAC) which works in collaboration with the Center for Research and Quality Assurance (CRQA) – a body which used to do the task of institutional assessment prior to the establishment of the QAC.

The QAC is composed of seven members, four associate directors and three coordinators all of whom have taken a "comprehensive" training on institutional quality assessment.

This QAC has organized other four quality assessment units which can address quality issues at different levels. These units deal with the assessment of the performances of faculties, the administration, departments, and instructors. One of the units processes quality assurance data. The QAC has identified performance indicators which can serve as a stepping-stone to assess and follow up the quality of programs being offered. In order to see the progress of each unit in discharging its responsibilities, the QAC holds a monthly meeting with top management bodies. The implication is that SMUC has laid the foundation to go into the job and knows what to do next.

As has been discussed above, SMUC's practice is far better than that of KCTE, which has not yet paid due attention to the establishment of a quality assurance body, without which institutional quality assessment and follow-up of the programs it is offering will be very difficult to manage, if not impossible. The non-existence of this particular body seems to have affected KCTE in carrying out the various activities of quality assurance. The move of SMUC is therefore encouraging while KCTE's appears to be the vice versa.

3.2. Policy and procedures for Quality Assurance

Table 2. Department heads' response on policy and procedures

	YES		NO	UNDE	CIDED	TOTAL		
THE INSTITUTION I WORK FOR:	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC
has a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality of its programs.	-	1	1	-	2	5	3	6

As shown in Table 2, the majority of the respondents seem to be uncertain that their respective institution has a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality of programs each is giving.

The interview result shows that both of them do not have a policy and associated procedures helpful to assure the quality of their programs. SMUC, however, uses its vision statement – usually the very source for a policy – as a springboard for quality assurance. In an attempt to address the issue of quality education, SMUC is working on setting benchmarking.

Quality comes out of a clear policy and associated procedures. The two institutions vary in their commitment to the development of a culture that recognizes the importance of quality and quality assurance. Unlike KCTE which has not started the long way to develop a quality assurance policy and procedures, SMUC seems to be on the right track that leads it to having such a policy and associated procedures. It should, however, be noted that both of the institutions have much to work on developing a policy and procedures that can help them assure the quality of their programs.

3.3. Internal Quality Audit

Table 3. Department heads' response on internal quality audit

	YES		NO		UNDECIDED		TOTAL	
THE INSTITUTION I WORK FOR:	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC
conducts internal quality audit.	2	6	-	-	1	1	3	6

As Table 3 shows, 2 of the respondents from KCTE and all of the respondents from SMUC confirm that their respective institution makes self-assessment. The interview result, on the other hand, reveals that the two institutions have a remarkable difference in terms of conducting internal quality assessment. Whereas KCTE has never carried out internal quality audit, SMUC does every two year. According to the president, SMUC was the first private institution to carry out its first internal quality audit two years back. Responses given to the open-ended question and the document observation also show that SMUC conducts performance assessment of departments and offices every six months.

Because the institution learnt from its past experience that keeping this good beginning going demands skillful individuals, the University College in collaboration with the Embassy of the United States brought a Fulbright specialist and trained more than 40 of its academic staff on quality and quality assessment. The members of the QAC and the other four units are drawn from these trained individuals.

3.4. Information Systems

Table 4. Department heads' response on information systems

	YES		NO		UNDE	CIDED	TOTAL	
THE INSTITUTION I WORK FOR:	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC
collects, analyzes and uses relevant information for the effective management of its programs.	3	5	-	1	-	-	3	6

Institutions can upgrade themselves when they know about themselves. This can be achieved by conducting collecting, analyzing and using relevant information. As shown in Table 4, all the respondents in KCTE and almost all of them in SMUC agree that their respective institution collects, analyzes and uses relevant information to effectively manage the programs each is giving. The interview result, nonetheless, reveals that both institutions are not exerting continuous effort to collect, analyze and use relevant information for the effective management of their programs though SMUC attempted to conduct a "Student Satisfaction Survey" once.

Except that they overhear about themselves, both KCTE and SMUC have no concrete evidence about people's feedback on their works. This may halt their struggle to satisfy the needs of stakeholders. This may imply that both of the institutions have to design a system which helps them secure regular feedback from the community to which they are rendering the service.

3.5. Periodic Review of Programs

Table 5. Department heads' response on periodic review of programs

	Y	YES		NO		CIDED	TOTAL	
THE INSTITUTION I WORK FOR:	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC
reviews its programs periodically.	1	5	2	-	-	1	3	6

As illustrated in Table 5, only one of the respondents from KCTE agrees that the institution reviews its programs periodically while almost all the respondents from SMUC claim that their institution carries out program review every two year.

It was learnt from the interview that the institutions have different practice in this regard. Though KCTE had a trend of reviewing the curriculum and preparing new catalogues in the earlier times, it no longer makes periodic review of its programs due to the lack of responsible body. SMUC, however, has a two-year formal review of its programs. Departments do the job under the coordination of the CRQA of the institution. Once departments and other concerned bodies carry out the program review, professionals from other institutions or offices are invited for their comments and suggestions.

The implication is that because KCTE has no responsible body which coordinates such things, it cannot consistently review its programs. SMUC seems to have more encouraging experience in this regard than KCTE.

3.6. Peer Review

Table 6. Department heads' response on peer review

	YES		NO		UNDE	CIDED	TOTAL		
THE INSTITUTIO N I WORK FOR:	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	
makes peer review.	1	2	2	3	-	1	3	6	

Peer review helps institutions to identify their strengths and weakness, thus creating the opportunity for them to learn from one another. Both KCTE and SMUC do not seem to benefit anything out of this. As indicated in Table 6, whereas only one of the respondents from KCTE witnessed that the institution makes peer review, two of them responded the other way. Similarly, two of the respondents from SMUC claimed that their institution makes peer review while three of the respondents said the institution has no culture of carrying out peer review. The interview result shows that both KCTE and SMUC pay no attention to peer evaluation.

2.7. Learning Resources

Table 7. Department heads' response on learning sources

	YES		NO		UNDE	CIDED	TOTAL	
THE INSTITUTION I WORK FOR:	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	КСТЕ	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC
ensures that the resources available for the support of student learning are adequate and appropriate for each program offered.	3	3	0	2	-	1	3	6

Institutions must have a mechanism to check the adequacy and appropriateness of learning resources. The institutions' effort in this regard is inconsistent. The table above shows that whereas all the respondents from KCTE and half of the respondents from SMUC agree that the institutions check the availability of adequate and appropriate learning resources, two of the respondents from SMUC disagreed. It was learnt during the interview that the practice of the two institutions is different in terms of ensuring the availability of adequate and appropriate learning resources. KCTE is doing nothing in this respect, except discussing the issue in the academic commission. The reason for not doing the same may be attributed to the lack of a concerned body which makes such follow-up.

Apart from conducting informal studies about the availability of adequate and appropriate learning materials – usually done by the top management bodies – and trying to make all possible attempts to fulfill learning facilities, SMUC has opened three offices namely, Student Affairs Office, the Student Council and the Degree Program Coordination Office to provide students with all the support they might need. Nonetheless, there is no independently organized body that ensures whether or not the available learning materials and facilities are adequate and appropriate. This seems to have contributed to the institution's failure to make regular and continues follow-up. And yet, SMUC is better than KCTE.

3.8. Teaching staff Appointment and Promotion

Table 8. Department heads' response on teaching staff appointment and promotion

	YES		NO		UNDECIDED		TOTAL	
THE INSTITUTION I WORK FOR:	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC
has set criteria to appoint and promote the teaching staff.	3	2	-	2	-	2	3	6

The teaching staff is the major learning resource students can make use of. Employing qualified instructors and evaluating their performance on duty are of paramount importance.

The institutions' attempt to employ qualified teaching staff is encouraging but compared to SMUC, KCTE has a long way to go in terms of ensuring the efficiency of its teaching staff.

As the figures above show, all the respondents from KCTE agree that the institution appoints and promotes the teaching staff with set criteria. While only 2 of the respondents from SMUC witnessed that it uses set criteria to appoint and promote the teaching staff, the remaining said the opposite and showed uncertainty. The interview result indicates that both KCTE and SMUC have got set criteria for teaching staff appointment and promotion though they show certain difference in implementation.

KCTE has a committee, which does the scrutiny in accordance with the criteria set. The committee administers written exams to and interviews the candidates. Then it presents those who have passed both the written exam and the interview to the academic commission for blessing. SMUC, on its part, does background study about the candidate, evaluates the CV and holds interview. In SMUC, the interview is done in the presence of the President and the Academic Dean so that highly qualified professionals are chosen among the candidates. There is no recruiting committee as such.

To check instructors' performance, KCTE uses a set of performance evaluation form which is filled out by students, peers and department heads. However, it is not properly utilized due to department heads' and instructors' lack of commitment and concern to fill and let fill out the form properly. SMUC has "a draft document on comprehensive instructors' evaluation criteria". To ensure the efficiency of an instructor, SMUC uses student evaluation, peer evaluation and evaluation by department heads. An instructor, who scores less than 3.5 points (taken out of 5) in two consecutive semester evaluations, is no longer allowed to continue teaching. What is more, it is a must for a new instructor to take pedagogic training as soon as employed.

3.9. Potential Employers' Role

Table 9. Department heads' response on potential employers' role

	YES		NO		UNDECIDED		TOTAL	
THE INSTITUTION I WORK FOR:	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC
involves potential employers in the assessment of the quality of education.	2	4	-	1	1	1	3	6

Potential employers should have a say on the quality of education, curriculum development, etc. The figures above indicate that both institutions give a room for potential employers. The interview result shows the inconsistent move of the institutions. Though not regular, KCTE holds meetings with employers – education bureaus.

Such meetings could offer the college the opportunity to receive feedback about its overall activities which it did not make use of as efficiently as it should (see point 3.4). What is more, it does not involve employers while developing curriculum.

SMUC involves potential employers to some extent. For instance, when computer science curriculum was designed, some potential employers took part. Similar attempts were made in the development of curriculum for departments such as marketing and management. It was, however, done only once. In an attempt to involve potential employers in the assessment process, SMUC has established a Community Service Center, which studies the skills and knowledge potential employers require from graduates. This office is hoped to liaison the two parties: the University College and the potential employers. In response to meeting the need of potential employers, this year for the first time, SMUC has planned to train graduating class of management department students on employability skills so that they will clearly know what they will do when they go to different organizations as new employees. The implication may be that SMUC involves potential employers in the institutional assessment indirectly – an encouraging task to maintain the quality of education.

3.10. Employment Rate

Table 10. Department heads' response on employment rate

	YES		NO		UNDECIDED		TOTAL	
THE INSTITUTION I WORK FOR:	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC	KCTE	SMUC
Checks new graduates' employment rate.	1	1	-	1	2	4	3	6

Both institutions do not study the employment opportunities of their graduates. While only one respondent in each institution responded that their respective institute studies new graduates' employment rate, the remaining were undecided. It was learnt during the interview that KCTE does not carry out such a study because its graduates have 100% employment opportunity as they are admitted to the college following the recruitment done by their respective employers – education bureaus.

It should be noted that this cannot be a guarantee for the quality of its programs. SMUC's experience in terms of checking the employment rate of its new graduates is not different. It does not conduct any study on the number and extent of employment opportunity for its graduates. This implies that both give less attention to studying the employment rate of their graduates which is important to learn the quality of programs they are offering.

3.11. Other Activities Performed to Maintain the Quality of Education

This sub-section presents information procured through open-ended questions, interview and document evaluation. The responses are discretely discussed here because the pieces of information were not included in the questions discussed above. In order to avoid redundancy, only those responses with new information are discussed below.

As could be learnt from the interview, KCTE attempts to implement the TESO program by way of identifying its weaknesses. However, it is not properly implemented due to low commitment of the academic staff and lack of a unit which is responsible for the same. The institution is, however, trying to upgrade the skills of instructors by offering them Higher Diploma Program training which SMUC is also engaged in.

SMUC, on the other hand, makes rigorous assessment on the input, the process and the output to maintain the quality of education. Under input, the University College puts watchful eyes on learning resources and instructor appointment (see sections 3.7 and 3.8). Student selection is also a focus of attention in the input. SMUC admits students on competition basis. In the 1998EC academic year enrolment, for example, only those students who scored 2.4 and above were admitted to the degree program. This trend is said to continue in the future. The other point the University College pays attention to is the process. This includes following-up the day-to-day teaching/learning activities, department responsibilities, and extracurricular activities. Since the performance of instructors can be seen in what they do in the classroom and in their contribution to extracurricular activities, the University College attends the day-to-day activities of its instructors through the Program Office.

The departmental council makes weekly assessment of the academic process. In addition, the Center for Research and Quality Assurance closely observes the teaching/learning process. The third area of emphasis is the outcome. This is an area where the University College is planning to reinforce.

Conclusions

Though this small research is not exhaustive and conclusive, the findings indicate that SMUC is more concerned about quality matters than KCTE is. SMUC attempts to practice self-evaluation in a more focused manner than KCTE does. This is not to say that there are no weaknesses that SMUC has shown. To be more specific:

- SMUC has a Quality Assessment Council which is responsible for monitoring the quality of education while KCTE does not have any.
- Despite the lack for a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the
 quality of its programs, SMUC attempts to use its vision statement usually the
 very source for a policy as a springboard for quality assessment. KCTE neither
 has a policy and procedures that can assure its programs nor uses its vision
 statement to assess the quality of education, which can enable it to safeguard it
 from compromise.
- SMUC seems to practice internal quality audit, KCTE does not pay attention to it.
- SMUC reviews its programs every two year, but KCTE does not at this moment.
- Although both claim to have set criteria for staff appointment and promotion, SMUC's experience seems to be better in terms of evaluating instructors' efficiency than that of KCTE. It should however be noted that both offer professional development trainings and workshops to their academic staff. This is encouraging.
- SMUC attempts to ensure the availability of adequate and appropriate learning resources while KCTE does not.
- Except the one time attempt of SMUC's "Student Satisfaction Survey", both fail to constantly collect, analyze and use relevant information to effectively run their program of studies.

- Peer review seems to have received no attention by both institutions.
- Both have shown weakness in consistently following-up and documenting the employment rate of their graduates.
- Both fail to consistently involve potential employers in the institutional assessment process.

5. Recommendations

Institutional assessment plays a significant role in the enhancement of the quality of education. This small research has shown that SMUC is better in doing the task than KCTE is. The following recommendations are made in light with the need for organized quality assessment in KCTE and SMUC.

5.1. Recommendations for KCTE

As has been discussed above, KCTE has to go a long way to implement institutional quality assessment. Therefore, it is high time that it should:

- establish a quality assessment or assurance office which would handle all matters pertinent to quality and quality assessment;
- commit itself to the development of a culture which recognizes the importance of quality and quality assurance, in its work;
- have a policy and procedures for the assurance of its programs;
- carry out internal quality audit periodically;
- resume the periodic review of its programs;
- design impartial and objective criteria to evaluate the efficiency of instructors and strive for its implementation;
- introduce a culture that helps the institution constantly collect, analyze, and use relevant information about its performance;
- designate an independent office which ensures whether or not the learning resources for student support are adequate and appropriate to each program offered;
- give due attention to peer review;

 enhance the potential employers' involvement in the institutional assessment process.

5.2. Recommendations for SMUC

Though the research has shown SMUC to have done more than what KCTE is doing, it has to:

- draw a policy and procedures that can help it to assure the quality of education;
- make its system of collecting, analyzing, and using relevant information about its performance constant;
- give a room for peer review;
- capitalize its culture of monitoring and periodic review of its programs;
- conduct constant surveys on the employment rate of its graduates;
- designate an independent office which ensures whether or not the learning resources for student support are adequate and appropriate to each program;
- above all, capitalize the self-assessment it is carrying out in a constant manner.

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