

The European Dimension in Irish Education and the Challenges of Brexit

Reflections on 50 years of Ireland's EEC/EU membership

This major article explores how Ireland's education system has engaged with the European Union since accession to the EEC 50 years ago. The role of Europe at all levels of Irish education has changed significantly over the years, and the consequences of these changes are often overlooked. Given how much of our daily lives are informed by decisions made at EU level, it is vital that we retain and foster a European consciousness being lost in the global orientation of educational policy.



Joachim Fischer
School of Modern
Languages and Applied
Linguistics, University of
Limerick

Introduction

Next year Ireland will mark the 50th anniversary of its entry into the European Union's (EU) predecessor, the European Economic Community (EEC), on 1 January 1973. This may be an appropriate time to reflect on the role the European dimension has played in Irish education during this period. Education is all too often overlooked in discussions about the EU, which tend, not only in Ireland, to limit themselves to political, economic, and legal aspects.¹

Ireland's membership in the EU has undoubtedly been good for the country. Economically, Ireland has developed dramatically over the last 50 years (though not without occasional, equally dramatic, setbacks). It has overtaken many other economies to become one of the wealthiest EU member states and a net contributor to the EU budget, though we have come to doubt the general validity of some standard economic measurements.

Membership has also helped to substantially modernise and liberalise Irish society, improving women's rights, increasing worker protection, protecting our physical environment, and generally broadening our perspective by allowing Ireland to measure itself against its European peers. In the decades following accession, Irish education responded positively to the Europeanisation of Irish society by building European elements into courses and curricula at all levels, reflecting a degree of enthusiasm in educational circles about the new possibilities opening up, especially for young people.

This has served Ireland well: several Irish people who came to play key roles in the EU, such as Catherine Day and David O'Sullivan as the EU Commission's Secretaries-General, European Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly, and Commissioner Mairead McGuinness, were all products of the early phase of membership. They allowed Ireland to box above its weight in the EU. From 1987 onwards, the education system benefitted – as it still does – from the Erasmus programme which the late Peter Sutherland, during a brief spell as Commissioner for Education, helped to establish – not to mention schemes such as Comenius, Leonardo da Vinci, and Jean Monnet, all of which make up Erasmus+ now.

At third level the National Institute of Higher Education in Limerick opened its doors 50 years ago, in October 1972, and set itself up to become Ireland's most European-focused third-level institution, pioneering an undergraduate degree in European Studies and making European languages compulsory for all (!) students in the early years. Brigid Laffan, founder of the Dublin European Institute, and later director of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute in Florence, was a much sought-after commentator on European affairs in Ireland and elsewhere, and was among the first cohort of European Studies students in Limerick.

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In light of these frequently mentioned European impacts on Irish education, a recent column by *Irish Times* Brussels correspondent Naomi O'Leary showed that things may have shifted considerably. She reported that since 2015, 'only 22 Irish candidates have passed the generalist and specialist competitions to join the European Commission, excluding linguistics, which is insufficient to replace the 69 Irish officials who are due to depart' (O'Leary, 2022).

This is a development of huge concern to the Irish government, which is anxious to maintain its influence in Brussels. Ironically it comes at a time when Irish applicants – as native speakers of the EU's lingua franca, replacing departing British staff – should be doing particularly well in EU competitions. The comparatively low achievement level in languages is one factor in a competition that requires high-level competence in another EU language. But closer examination makes it more likely that there are deeper reasons why fewer Irish young people covet such positions – that in fact Irish education has lost much of its European focus, and consequently the EU is less on young people's radar than it used to be.

Quite rightly the Department of Foreign Affairs' recruitment strategy *A Career for EU*, designed to encourage Irish young people to apply for positions in EU institutions, aims among other actions to concentrate its activities on Irish schools (DFA, 2022, p.17). The number of courses at third-level institutions with a European focus has declined noticeably. From experience as course director of one of the two CAO-listed bachelor of arts programmes in European Studies left in the country, I have for years been confronted with first-year students who report that they learnt very little, if anything, about the EU during their 12 years of formal schooling.

This arguably reflects broader trends in society where, increasingly, much of what has been achieved is taken for granted. In a way the EU has been a victim of its own success: the peace and prosperity it has brought have blotted out the memory of the wars that preceded it (though the current conflict in Ukraine is a stark reminder); the freedoms and protections we enjoy seem no longer to require effort and engagement.

The declining importance and increasing invisibility of the European dimension in Irish education comes at a particularly inopportune time, since the Brexit decision of our nearest neighbour in June 2016 has ushered in momentous changes that have fundamentally altered our relationship with the EU. It has accelerated the key ambition of those advocating membership in the 1970s: to come out of the shadows of the erstwhile colonial power, the United Kingdom, to further reduce Ireland's economic dependency on the UK, and to forge our own independent and confident way in Europe.

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There is ample evidence that our accelerating integration has intensified our direct contacts with key fellow member states, both politically and economically. Three strategy papers issued since 2016 by the Department of Foreign Affairs aim to put Ireland's relationship with Germany (2017), France (2019), and most recently the Scandinavian countries (2021) on a more comprehensive and solid footing. These are mirroring politically the construction of the Celtic Interconnector power cable with France and the ever-increasing direct trade expressed, for instance, by the near four-fold increase, in 2021, of direct freight shipments within one year, a 69% increase in passenger numbers in Rosslare's Europort alone, and the decline of the land bridge via the UK (Carswell, 2022).

If the regularly published Eurobarometer opinion polls are any indication, the general public is content with these trends: our attitude is solidly pro-European, with 70% of respondents having a positive image of the EU and only 6% a negative image in the latest poll (no. 97) of summer 2022. Ireland has in fact the most positive image of the EU, and the likelihood is that these are long-term trends, supported further by the political chaos and economic damage that Brexit continues to inflict on the UK.

That there is a mismatch between post-Brexit developments and educational policy is suggested in the 2019 strategy paper *Cumasú: Empowering through Learning*. In his foreword, then Minister Joe McHugh wrote:

We face many challenges, including the potential impact of Brexit on education and training. While my Department's response will continue to evolve, we will maintain and progress collaboration on a North-South and East-West basis to ensure that the education and training system is maintained and, in particular, that the peace dividend experienced since the Good Friday Agreement can be supported. We will continue to engage in cooperation and partnership to best deliver the skills and services that learners need – ní neart go cur le chéile. (DES, 2019, p.8)

We must conclude that Irish education is content with looking east and north, rather than towards Europe, adopting a rather Hiberno-centric and insular perspective that focuses on the undoubted problems for Ireland rather than the spectacular rise of new opportunities that Brexit has created for young people.

Global turn

It is, however, less such insular perspectives that have relegated the European dimension to near invisibility over the last two decades. As Ireland came to regard itself as 'one of the most globalised economies in the world' (ESRI, 2013), the perspective of Irish education also went global. This is indicated clearly in the key strategy paper *Irish Educated, Globally Connected: An International Education Strategy for Ireland 2016–2020*, which preceded Brexit. The strategy explicitly aims at developing Ireland 'to become internationally recognised for the development of global citizens'. In the words of Minister Richard Bruton, it aims

to support the development of global citizens through Ireland's high-quality international education system, by attracting talent from around the world to our education institutions, equipping Irish learners with the skills and experience they need to compete internationally, engaging in world-class research and international collaborations, and addressing global challenges. (DES, 2016, p.5)

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While there are good arguments for broadening the perspective of Irish education, the effect of the global turn has been, as evidence suggests, that the European dimension has become well-nigh invisible and merged into the 'global' label – as if Ireland had the same relationship with China and Singapore that it has with Germany or France. When the government's *Languages Connect* strategy of 2017 demands that 'the education system must support learners of all ages to gain the skills and confidence to be not only Irish and EU citizens but also global citizen' (DES, 2015, p.5), it seems to assume that the Irish education system already equips Irish students to become EU citizens, that this is a sign of the past, a point of departure.

But this is not the case. There are good reasons to believe that young Irish people's sense of European citizenship is poorly developed and that its development is no longer a priority of the educational system. Nor is there any sign that, five years after the Brexit referendum, the global orientation of educational policy – which is in line with UK educational thinking – is to be revised, at a time when the globalised system, due to both Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine, is increasingly questioned.

Languages

Languages are a good indicator for Ireland's real engagement with the EU, as only 1.5% of its citizens speak English as their mother tongue. It was therefore appropriate that *Languages Connect* was among the first strategy papers occasioned by Brexit. It was to then Minister Bruton's great credit that he set specific and ambitious five-year targets in an Implementation Plan for 2017–2022.

Now that the first five years are up, it is obvious that hardly any of the increases targeted in the various sectors have been achieved. While there can be no argument that Covid-19 impacted especially negatively on language learning, as it relies heavily on face-to-face interaction, it is open to debate whether any of the targets would have been met had the pandemic not happened.

Looking at the sector I am most familiar with and the difficulty involved in even formulating clear languages policies, often against vested interest in the powerful STEM subjects, there is good reason for doubt: no Irish university is on course to meet the target of 20% of students studying a foreign language by 2030. In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that the number of language students is declining. This is not to deny the valiant work done by Post-Primary Languages Ireland to implement *Languages Connect*.

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That Europe has been lost between the global and local agendas, and that the momentum characterising the era towards the end of the 20th century has dissipated, will become clear in the following brief review of the European dimension at the four levels of education.²

Primary sector

The scrapping of the Modern Languages in the Primary School pilot project, to save a minuscule amount of money in the immediate aftermath of the financial crisis, was a particularly short-sighted decision which has continued to throw a long shadow upon the present day. Not only did the project awaken children's interest in languages, it was also a key space where a sense of the EU and its cultural diversity could be developed.

Its removal indicated to parents that languages (beyond Irish) are not a priority. There are clear signs that modern languages are now going to be brought back into primary education, with the particular interest of the present Taoiseach adding momentum. They also feature prominently in the new *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* currently under discussion. This is one of the most hopeful signs in the present debate, but it will take considerable time to work itself through the system.

There has been a general trend towards outsourcing the European dimension to bodies external to the State system. This applies also the primary sector, where it has become the domain of organisations such as the European Movement, in the shape of the Blue Star programme or the exciting web-based Big Friendly Guide to the EU developed in University College Cork. These are both very successful programmes, but it has not been to the benefit of the European dimension that it has always remained additional and voluntary instead of consciously and deliberately embedded in the State's curricula.

That this is likely to continue is evident in the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*, the blueprint for the coming decades, which is otherwise full of exciting new educational departures. The framework claims to prepare children for 'tomorrow's world' but takes no account of European integration; in fact, the words *Europe* and *European* are conspicuous by their absence in the whole text. The competency of 'being an active citizen' – a hugely significant and welcome new area that the framework introduces – 'develops children's capacity and motivation for active and meaningful participation in society at local, national and global levels, and fosters their ability to contribute positively and compassionately towards the creation of a more sustainable and just world' (NCCA, 2020, p.8).

These are worthwhile overall aims, but it is striking that the world outside Ireland appears to be treated equally as elements of the 'global level'; there is no level between the national and the global. This does nothing to enable children, even at this young age, to grasp the basics of European citizenship, of which they can see evidence with their own eyes on the cover of the maroon passports. Nor is any distinction made between EU languages and other languages.

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Second-level education

Similar trends inform curricular developments at second level. The European Studies Project funded by EU cross-border funding petered out in the boom years. Although the European Parliament Liaison Office's (EPLO) Ambassador Schools programme is expanding, it only ever reaches a small number of schools, regularly fighting against much more immediate pressures faced by teachers and management.

There has also been a significant increase in EU-funded Erasmus+ activities, but their impact will always be limited as long as they remain a voluntary element to Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) and Transition Year, neither of which students (and occasionally their parents) tend to take seriously enough, conditioned as they are in the centrality of grades. Nor are many teachers comfortable with teaching a subject they may not feel too informed about themselves.

The CSPE curriculum is indicative of the change of focus. Introduced in 1997 (and revised in 2003), the discontinued curriculum stated, 'Citizenship Education aims at creating knowledge of the political system operating in Ireland, Europe and the world' (DES, 2005, p.20). Unit 4, 'Ireland and the World', mentions the aspects 'MEP', 'European Commission', 'European Union', and 'European Parliament' and adds: 'These questions can be explored through study of Ireland's membership of international groupings, for example the European Union, the Council of Europe and the United Nations' (ibid., p.15).

In contrast, the Junior Cycle curriculum for CSPE (2016, updated in 2021) only uses the term 'global citizenship'. The EU appears in a single phrase under 'Exploring Democracy', which has the objective of enabling students to 'use the correct terminology to describe Irish and European democratic institutions, structures, political parties and roles' (NCCA, 2021, pp. 9, 15) – a much narrower approach which limits itself effectively to naming the EU institutions.

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The global turn at second level takes the form of introducing development education and global justice, both unquestionably admirable and valuable objectives that are becoming the predominant objectives of citizens' education. Yet why this shift should effectively replace all curricular traces of Europe is entirely unclear, especially as the EU is increasingly a key player in alleviating the consequences of global injustices, in particular from climate change. Politics and Society is a welcome addition to the list of Leaving Cert subjects and offers a significant space for European Studies, but its impact, with only around 4% sitting the exam four years after its introduction, will not change the overall picture in the near future.

While the teaching of modern languages contrasts positively with its catastrophic decline in the UK, it has not seen the increases demanded by *Languages Connect*. It was always problematic that no clear budget accompanied the measures beyond setting up and staffing the very active post-primary languages initiative. Between 2017 and 2022 there has been no increase in the number of students sitting the Leaving Cert exam in modern languages but merely a diversification.

While this is welcome considering the traditional overwhelming predominance of French, much of it is due to facilitating immigrant native speakers of eastern European EU languages rather than Irish learners. The only noticeable shift in actual language learning has been from French and German to Spanish, mirroring trends in the UK. This contradicts trade links, which continue to expand with the two most powerful countries and economies in the EU.

There may be good reasons to regret the lack of progress made with German in particular, spoken by the largest language community in the EU, not only for economic reasons but also because its media give a good impression of

where the debate about the EU may be heading next. Sadly, the ambitious doubling of modern language assistants envisaged by *Languages Connect* has been badly affected by Covid-19 restrictions; the presence of those assistants adds a hugely beneficial real-life European dimension to every school they teach in.

Third level

The neglect at second level filters down into demand for Europe-related courses. Anyone teaching in European Studies at third level will have long witnessed a decline in applicants for such programmes or for other programmes with an explicit European focus. Whoever wants a fuller picture might compare the courses listed in the European Movement's 2011 guide *Studying Europe: An Audit of EU-Related Qualifications in the Irish Third-Level Sector* with the situation today. It shows that a similar contraction occurred at postgraduate level.

The Department of Foreign Affairs' well-intentioned measure, aimed at increasing the quality of Irish applicants for posts in the EU, of awarding scholarships only for courses at the College of Europe in Bruges and in Natolin, Warsaw, did little to increase applications for any of the master of arts courses running at Irish universities. Research centres with a European focus are significantly smaller now than a decade ago; the Dublin European Institute at University College Dublin is an example, though some have been revived and new ones have been established as a result of substantial EU funding.

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Third level has perhaps been the main driver of the global strategy, developed when all sectors of education were still under a single departmental roof. As the widespread trend towards the commodification of education continued, especially in the Anglophone world, Irish universities found new markets in Asia, where students paying high non-EU fees became a vital source of income that allowed universities to cope with the chronic underfunding of the sector.

Several international offices were renamed *global* after the institution's name (e.g., Trinity Global), while the visibility of the European dimension was often reduced to the letter E in Erasmus+; Erasmus exchanges became a sector of 'global mobilities'. The need for additional income put pressure on Erasmus: the programme cost money rather than bringing in additional funds, because all Irish universities – as very sought-after English-language destinations, especially after UK universities dropped out of Erasmus – regularly took in more students than they sent out.

The predominant global discourse in Irish universities had the effect that successes in acquiring major grants from Erasmus+ or Jean Monnet programmes were rarely considered headline news: take for example Irish universities' spectacular performance in the new area of Teacher Education in 2021, when three out of twenty major Jean Monnet grants

awarded EU-wide went to Ireland. Now that Ireland's universities are eager to increase their participation in EU-funded programmes, especially in Horizon Europe, there is a danger that their reduced European focus may work against them, as the multi-billion-euro programme, quite rightly, expects programmes to be firmly embedded in an EU framework.

Third level has not even begun to take languages seriously again, though this is demanded by both the internationalisation strategy and *Languages Connect*. There are few credible ideas about how to improve the uptake of languages by students; many lecturers themselves may have internalised the idea that English is enough. The number of academic staff willing and able to read and integrate research findings in another EU language in their teaching may actually be lower than that of their students. The consequence is that a purely Anglophone and non-European perspective pervades virtually all disciplines outside modern languages, accelerated by global ranking exercises which only take English-language publications into account.

Lifelong learning

The concept of lifelong learning was a casualty of the financial crisis. As the utilitarian understanding of education to improve career prospects took hold, interaction with the community moved into the background.

However, as all European societies age, Ireland only a little later than others, universities are starting to take the first tentative steps in the direction of age-friendly universities.

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This is relevant in the present context. Already now the predominance of older citizens is noticeable in public debates with an EU focus, such as those in the Conference on the Future of Europe. This can be read negatively as another indicator of a generational decline of interest in matters European, but it can also be turned into a positive

asset: Those with pre-1973 memories are well placed to tell the younger generation what has been achieved and remind them how much they take for granted in their daily lives.

Such intergenerational discourses can be extremely fruitful, injecting real-life experiences into the teaching of European Studies at all levels. Nor is there any reason why educators in European Studies should not also focus on older age groups in outreach activities as long as demand from younger generations remains low. It is an ever-growing sector of society that citizenship education under-serves. It is also one that, in contrast to many younger voters, overwhelmingly goes to the polls. Politicians take heed!

Towards a social and cultural turn of European Studies

This brings us to the content of European Studies, more specifically European Union Studies. It has not added to the field's attractiveness that

it has generally remained wedded to the disciplines of politics, economics, and, at third level, law. Only a limited number of students are especially interested in these aspects; the lack of interest in politics among Irish students relative to their EU peers is often commented upon. The issues that European integration and EU citizenship entail go much further than that and involve questions of identity, openness, tolerance towards other world views, interest in other cultures, and a sense of European togetherness.

These cannot all be dealt with in a few hours in citizenship education. It would be a misunderstanding of the concept of European Studies if it remained compartmentalised into CSPE and the new Leaving Cert subject of Politics and Society. There are good arguments for reviewing all subjects with regard to their European dimensions, as is already the case with subjects such as Economics, Geography, and History.

The modern European languages classroom offers a particularly suitable environment for adding colour to European Union Studies, especially when augmented by school exchanges. Often overlooked are the subjects of Art History and Religious Education. But where the European dimension must make its mark is in the curricula of Irish and English, two compulsory subjects studied by the overwhelming majority of Irish students.

After the full implementation of Irish as an official EU language at the beginning of 2022, a European 'overhaul' could be of great benefit to the often little-loved subject. It would highlight not only its current relevance but also the job opportunities in the EU that excellent Irish opens up for Irish students. English also deserves a closer look, given that the language has become young people's lingua franca in the EU: far too little use is made of creative material such as European films, travel writing, European literature in translation, and texts that reflect more profoundly on European versus national identity and the cultures of other member states.

Ireland's Europeanness is also reflected in many Irish literary and journalistic texts; some interesting material for teaching purposes for the English classroom can be found in the recently published *Kaleidoscope 2: Europe in Ireland* website by the European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies (EFACIS, 2021), where well-known Irish writers reflect on their experience of the EU and what it means to them.

Schools are best placed to remind their students in all classes that there may be specific European perspectives and interests on all matters that reveal themselves only after the first 10 US and UK entries on Google have been bypassed, with discussions on the war in Ukraine offering a striking example. This is a better argument than the merely practical, economic one for why English is not enough. Young people themselves know more about some European (non-English-language) social media sites that they may find interesting to explore.

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Conclusion

Mary Harney's dictum of 2000 that Ireland was spiritually closer to Boston than Berlin may have been overstating the case, but there can be no question that belonging to the Anglophone world will always militate against European perspectives in Irish culture, as will US-based social media giants. This will continue to encourage many young people to think of working in Australia, Canada, the US, and even the UK before they contemplate other EU member states. It is an open question whether the majority will ever want to adopt the 'Berlin perspective'.

At the same time, it is the job of Irish educational institutions to instil a consciousness in coming generations that will help them master the challenges of the future, a future in which Europe and the EU will play a key role. As it is unlikely that the marginalisation of the European dimension in Irish education is explicitly wanted – the Eurobarometer suggests otherwise – it is more a matter of making this explicit once again. If Irish education is expected to give students a clear sense of the world they live in, this must entail spelling out how much of our daily lives are already determined by decisions made in Brussels.

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This is particularly true for the area of sustainability, which is bound to inform Irish educational policy centrally in the coming decades: the framework for Ireland's response to climate change is set by the European Green Deal. Minister Eamon Ryan spoke at COP-27 in Sharm el-Sheikh not for Ireland but for the European Union. That Irish children should only be taught about one aspect of the two political identities on the cover of their passports can hardly be regarded as comprehensive.

It is no excuse that none of the issues outlined here are unique to Ireland and that similar trends can be observed all over the EU, even in terms of learning EU languages beyond English. Education systems throughout Europe struggle with finding a new purpose beyond being the key guardian of an increasingly outmoded concept of national identity. Nor should the EU be considered a danger in this regard: against the massive daily onslaught of Americanised social media culture, the EU is the last bastion of cultural and linguistic diversity.

There are many signs that young people are willing to take up opportunities where they are offered: the substantial number of Erasmus+ student exchanges, rising numbers participating in the activities offered by the EPLO, the European Movement, and Léargas are a good basis to build on. Perhaps the introduction of a bachelor of arts course in European Studies in Ireland's largest university, University College Dublin, in 2021 is an indication that the tide might be turning (UCD, 2022). The goodwill and enthusiasm displayed by all participants at the first symposium on the European dimension in Irish education at the University of Limerick in May 2022, which brought professionals from all levels of education together, is also a very hopeful sign (UL, 2022).

The argument for moving the European dimension back into Irish education is broader than simply being the politically and economically sensible thing to do after Brexit. The future of the most successful inner-European peace project ever – brought into sharp relief by the war in Ukraine – lies in the hands of the coming generations. If we want the EU to continue and thrive, we will depend on young people's ideas, their imagination, and especially their willingness to fight for a better Europe that suits its citizens' needs.

It may even be appropriate occasionally to appeal to young people's sense of duty. Not only can we expect Irish young people who have benefitted so much from Ireland's membership of the EU to give something back in return for all the freedoms they enjoy, they also owe it to their peers across Europe who will depend on their engagement to build the EU of the future together.

Irish young people have so much to give – at the very least their unbeatable sense of irreverence and humour: the famous banner that young Irish soccer fans displayed in Poland, 'Angela Merkel thinks we are at work', is not only hilarious but also a profound expression of a developing European consciousness.

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ENDNOTES

1. See for instance this otherwise excellent recent survey: Holmes, M. and Simpson, K. (Eds.) (2021) *Ireland in the European Union: Economic, Political and Social Crises*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
2. Some arguments presented here are expanded in Fischer, J. (2022) 'Where is Europe in Irish education? Plaidoyer for a revival of European Studies in Irish schools after Brexit'. In: P. Carmichael and G. Holfter (Eds.) *Unions, Break-ups and Special Relationships: Aspects of Irish-German-UK Relations*, pp.113–134. Trier: WVT.

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