

Pocket Books of Engagement: A 'Just-in-time' Framework for a High Quality First Year Student Experience

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Abstract

This paper describes a 'just-in-time' engagement framework for a high quality first year experience ('FYE'). The concept 'just-in-time' refers to a student-centered timeline for a managed learning environment based on the week-to-week experiences faced by a first year student in an Australian University semester. The engagement framework detailed in this paper consists of a series of teaching strategies embedded as part of a designed, integrated and co-ordinated first year program, expanding on the transition blueprint of Nelson, Kift, Humphreys & Harper (2006), working within a transition pedagogy (Kift, 2008) and implementing an institutional-wide program of collaborative engagement. This paper discusses the application of this framework to a first year foundational unit in the Bachelor of Laws degree at Deakin University, Victoria, Australia, implemented as part of an embedded institutional-wide transition program.

Key words: *First Year Experience; Student Engagement; Teaching Strategies; Curriculum Design; Diversity; Assessment.*

Introduction

In the next decade, a central, national benchmark for tertiary institutions will be the extent to which students are provided with a stimulating and rewarding higher education experience. To some degree, this shift has already begun to occur. When the National Learning and Teaching Performance Fund ('LTPF') was introduced in Australia in 2003 by the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* (Cth), the importance of both 'course experience' (as surveyed by the Course Experience Questionnaire 'CEQ') and 'graduate destination' (as surveyed by the Graduate Destination Survey 'GDS') gained increased prominence. In 2008, changes to the LTPF further emphasised the need for institutions to demonstrate 'improvement' in teaching and learning, in addition to the existing requirement to demonstrate 'excellence'. 'Student engagement', defined as 'students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning' (Australian Council for Educational Research 2008, p.14), has also gained significant prominence. The first use of the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement ('AUSSE') in 2007 attracted more than half of Australasian Universities (ACER 2008, p.5), with an increased rate in both 2008 and 2009. The use of AUSSE will become a national benchmark for tertiary performance, particularly given that in 2008, the Australian Government's *Review of Australian Higher Education*, chaired by Professor Denise Bradley, recommended that the Australian Government require all accredited higher education providers to administer the GDS, CEQ and AUSSE from 2009 and report annually on the findings (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales 2008, p.80).

The escalating importance of student 'destination', 'experience' and 'engagement' as key indicators of institutional performance has a potentially profound impact on Universities. In particular, Universities wishing to perform well on national surveys relating to teaching and learning must co-ordinate institutional and complementary approaches to the delivery of courses. This will require the involvement of, and cooperation between, all areas in the University, from divisions, to administration, student support and individual academics. In many respects, the decade of research into the 'first year experience' in Australian universities (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis 2005) provides an excellent institutional template for the successful integration of all components of an institution to facilitate a stimulating and rewarding educational experience for students. Certainly in respect to the first year experience (FYE), the requirements for a University-wide academic, administrative and student support areas to work together to produce a successful experience has been well advanced by the work of Kift in developing a transition pedagogy (Kift 2007, 2008), as well as previously (Krause *et al.* 2005; Hillman 2005; York & Longden 2007).

Deakin University in Victoria, Australia has mapped a commencing student's journal in a '12 month Transition Timeline'. The timeline is based on collaboration between academic and professional staff and divisions to emphasise the importance of networking and a 'sense of belonging', academic engagement, early career and course advice and the identification of 'at risk' students. Within this transition program, the purpose of this article is to provide particular teaching strategies academic staff can implement within a 'just-in-time' engagement framework for a high quality first year student experience. This approach to teaching complements an institutional transition program that addresses the changing needs of students as the semester progresses. The example in this paper is situated within the example of a discipline-specific unit, a first year unit at Deakin University, Victoria, Australia MLL110 *Law, Society and Civil Rights*, a foundational unit in the Bachelor of Laws degree. Lectures occur for four hours a week face-to-face on-campus. An online learning management system, *Deakin Studies Online*, facilitates learning and communication in the unit.

The Theoretical Basis for a ‘Just-in-time’ Engagement Strategy

In describing a first year transition pedagogy, Kift (2008) emphasised the need for institutional FYE practices to support new learners ‘through timely access to support and service provision’. In articulating a holistic transition pedagogy, Nelson *et al.* (2006) visualised a blueprint for enhanced transition modelled against the weeks of a semester. The intention of the Nelson *et al.* blueprint was:

[to] develop a transition blueprint within which these tools can be strategically and optimally delivered, both to avoid information overload at critical points and to support students in the entirety of their institutional interactions in an anticipatory, just-in-time manner (Nelson *et al.* 2006).

In Nelson *et al.* the features of a timely and holistic transition blueprint also included academic integrity, conflict resolution and teamwork protocol, an inventory of learning resources, and mapping, initiatives for international and domestic students with English as a second language, transition mentoring, a virtual learning environment and an ‘expectations survey’ (Nelson *et al.* 2006). The Nelson *et al.* blueprint also included a transition information staged delivery based on the Deakin ‘Infowflow’ Program as a ‘just-in-time’ communication over the first six weeks of the University Semester.

In 2008 Deakin University developed an extended model for transition, developed to respond to the student’s journey in their first year. It reflects the staged response models of Nelson *et al.* (2006) and the Deakin Infowflow model by mapping longitudinal themes of welcome, settling in, consolidating and finishing strongly against the semester timeline. These themes are supported by a vertical matrix of social, academic, personal and career development and response to the ‘at risk’ triggers which emerge in each of the stages of transition. The matrix is underpinned by the assignment of responsibilities across academic and professional staff in faculties and the support services of the university to integrate objectives and initiatives across the institution. The Deakin model offers an integrated approach to social, academic and personal support linked to the student’s experiences during their first 12 months. The objective is to ‘unpack’ and respond to emerging needs over time to foster confidence in the student’s capacity to engage successfully with the intellectual and social elements of university and reinforce their commitment to their academic and career goals. The Deakin approach is consistent with the proposal of Tinto (1993) that the formal and informal interactions students have with academics and peers shapes their academic and personal engagement, continuously modifying their commitment to their study, goals and their university.

The approach in this paper focuses, therefore, on a timely approach to FYE with particular consideration as to the particular strategies an academic could adopt to engage students ‘just-in-time’. The ‘just-in-time’ approach refers to a student-centered timeline for a managed learning environment based on the experiences and challenges faced by a first year student at a particular point of time in the semester. The title ‘pocket books of engagement’ captures the idea that an individual academic should be equipped with the tools of engagement, ready to be applied ‘just-in-time’. The framework is based on the assumption that in order to promote student engagement and therefore high quality student learning, the first year experience should be diverse enough to adapt to the learning challenges of a first year student just before it happens, and as it is happening. The basis of the ‘just-in-time’ framework is that it provides a seamless transition between all aspects of the FYE, to aid early student learning, engagement and success through a co-ordinated, sustained and embedded institutional-wide approach to first year (Kift 2008). The Deakin transition program is also intended to achieve student engagement, defined by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) in the AUSSE (ACER 2008) by five indicators:

- Academic challenge - An appropriate level of intellectual challenge and educational support to stimulate successful learning outcomes;

- Active and collaborate learning - Students' participation in experiences that involve constructing new knowledge and understanding;
- Student-staff interaction – a characteristic of high quality learning;
- Enriching educational experiences – learning outside the formal learning environment;
- Supportive learning environment – student perception of the extent to which an institution has supported their learning;
- Work integrated learning – the extent to which learners have blended academic learning with workplace experience (ACER 2008, p.18).

Teaching strategies are *part of* this holistic institutional approach to FYE. Ramsden (2003) considers the 'problem of teaching strategies' as requiring one to ask 'how should I arrange teaching and learning so that students have the greatest chance of learning what I want them to learn?' According to Ramsden (2003), 'in good teaching the method used is secondary to the teacher's aims for student learning and the extent to which the particular strategy realises the principles of effective teaching' (Ramsden 2003, p.145). Effective professional development of academic staff, therefore, should incorporate key ideas of student engagement and embed perspectives on engagement into teaching processes (Coates 2006, p.179). The framework in this paper, therefore, moves beyond simply the characteristics of an effective university teacher, which are well-known and documented (Ramsden 2003; Coates 2006), to the appropriate use of teaching strategies to assist academic staff to manage and lead effective forms of engagement (Coates 2006, p.179), in first year units within a holistic institutional program. Indeed, as Horan (1991) identifies, one of the common characteristics of excellent tertiary teaching is the 'demonstrated knowledge of and use of a variety of teaching techniques' (Horan 1991, p.23). The 'just-in-time' approach considers there to be a time and a place for particular teaching strategies, and considers their application in the exemplar of a first year law unit.

In terms of facilitating student engagement, the teaching strategies in this paper propose that an academic's starting point should be the snapshot of a 'first year student' provided by Krause *et al.* (2008). This would include the general observation that, based on a survey of first year Australian students in 2004, first year students are most likely to:

- begin University in a 'conditional and uncertain way';
- receive grades they generally expect to receive;
- spend approximately 4 to 5 days per week on campus, with an average of 11 hours per week in study and 16 per week in classes;
- need to juggle work and study commitments; and
- enjoy the intellectual challenge of study (Krause *et al.* 2005).

This approach does not intend to undermine the importance of recognising student diversity in a first year cohort, the recognition itself a crucial component of a successful first year engagement transition program. An excellent first year educator is one flexible enough to adapt to suit the particular characteristics of the students they teach. A first year experience must be responsive 'to the needs of demographic and cultural subgroups demands that student support staff, academics and administrators work together to integrate their efforts and initiatives for the benefit of all students' (Krause *et al.* 2005, p.89). For that reason, the particular experience of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, rural and isolated areas, non-English special backgrounds, Indigenous Australians, and students with disabilities (Hillman 2005, p.39.) in addition to the unique peculiarities of each individual student within the first year, should also be part of the engagement framework. In effect, the transition approach in this paper is simply one of 'good teaching' in that 'interpersonal relationships', showing concern and respect for students as individuals, the ability to improvise and adapt to new demands and a desire to learn from students as to the effects of teaching and how it can be improved (Ramsden 2003, p.87): all characteristics of an

excellent educator (Kane, Sandretto & Heath 2004, p.296). Bradley *et al.* (2008) too, define student experience in higher education as including, inter alia, teachers who are responsive to learners, who treat students as an individual and enter into a two-way communication about matters that pertain to academic progress, all factors that would require an educator to embrace student diversity (Bradley *et al.* 2008, p.79).

Application of the ‘Just-in-time’ Engagement Strategy

The just-in-time engagement framework is modelled into three stages for a first-year university semester, complemented by continuing and integrated teaching strategies, as detailed below. The following discussion applies the framework to a practical example, a law unit *Law Society and Civil Rights* (‘MLL110’). Throughout the Semester, teaching strategies within the framework are designed to embed skill development within the curriculum, reduce student anonymity, foster involvement and integrate learner-centered approaches to learning (Australian Universities Teaching Committee 2001). Semester-long teaching strategies include:

- Clearly explained ‘learner-centered’ approaches in class;
- Integrated study and generic skills within the curriculum (Asmar, Brew, McCulloch, Peseta & Barrie 2000, p.25).

In this approach, professional development for academic staff directly addresses the issues of first year teaching. First year academic professional development particularly focuses on engagement strategies in first year teaching given that the Krause *et al.* (2005) study found that students did not generally find their subjects interesting and that only 53% of students thought academic staff were enthusiastic about the subjects that they taught (Krause *et al.* 2005, p.2). According to the report, less than half of the surveyed students thought that teaching staff were good at explaining things (Krause *et al.*, 2005, p.2). This result is concerning, particularly in light of the finding in the *Review of Australian Higher Education* that Australia has fallen behind its major competitor countries on key teaching and student indicators (Bradley *et al.* 2008, p.78) and that:

“Maintaining and improving the quality of teaching and learning will be a critical factor in the future success of universities and all other higher education providers. Students must be provided with the highest quality teaching and learning and a stimulating and rewarding higher education experience (Bradley *et al.* 2008, p.78).”

In this approach, the first year lecturer is ‘the right person for the job’: engaging, enthusiastic, motivating and find the subject they teach and the whole academic experience as interesting and enjoyable (Kane *et al.* 2004, p.298). A first year teacher is also trained in pedagogical skill – techniques teachers can learn and add to their teaching repertoire (Kane *et al.* 2004, p.293), traits learned and developed with peer assistance, communication, class management and the effective incorporation of technology in the first year program, as well as reflective practice.

Stage One: Orientation to Week Three of Semester

The first stage of the just-in-time engagement strategy assists students in overcoming their uncertainty of entering a new unit, a new degree and tertiary education for the first time, in addition to equipping students with the immediate skills they need to deal with the overwhelming volume of information the first few weeks bring (AUTC, 2001). Within this approach, strategies are deliberately placed to assist students to deal with the stress, anxiety and tension the transition to University brings (Darlaston-Jones, Cohen, Drew, Haunold, Pike, & Young 2001). The first stage capitalises on the overall positive outlook of first year students, and the expectation that University will provide an opportunity for intellectual challenge (Krause *et al.* 2005, p.2).

During the first weeks of the semester Deakin's 12 month transition timeline focuses on welcoming strategies and helping students to 'settle in'. Objectives in the first weeks include:

- Social/networking opportunities: formal, informal, inside and outside the classroom, peer and academic
- Senior student support: opportunities to engage with senior students
- Learning at Deakin: roles and responsibilities, expectations and requirements, learning styles and strategies
- Systems, spaces, support: learning environments (online, rooms and buildings) library, student support facilities
- Organisation: time management, study strategies, communication strategies
- Study skills development: introduction to referencing, plagiarism, language, assessment strategies
- Course/units/career direction: confirming choices in career direction and unit choices (and supporting change where appropriate)
- Attendance: follow up with students who miss orientation activities and early tutorials
- Refresh (week 3): social and academic focus, readdressing key information, informal faculty events, support services promotion

Teaching strategies at this stage include clear, simple 'need-to-know now' information including student support services, online resources 'frameworks' and weekly-planners. Student expectations are made explicit and articulated and include 'what to expect, and what to expect of me'/ the role of the lecturer as facilitator of student learning (Asmar *et al.* 2000, p.24). For this reason, in the first weeks of MLL110, specific teaching strategies in the first stage include:

- A week-to-week unit calendar;
- A 'question and answer' session solely on expectations, including questions incorporated from discussions after Orientation Week sessions and from online Facebook groups. Answers to questions were with respect to:
 - The unit itself ('What are the prescribed books in this Unit?'; 'What is the assessment in this Unit?'; 'What do I do if I miss a lecture/tutorial?'; 'How is the unit at a tertiary level different from secondary school?'; 'How does a 'learner-centered' approach to teaching work in this Unit?')
 - About the law degree itself (How does this Unit fit in the entire law degree?; 'What other subjects will I study in my law degree?')
 - About the lecturer / teachers in the Unit (When can I contact you about the course?; 'What do you want to be called?'; 'Do you read assignment drafts?'; 'What are your expectations before I come to a lecture?') and
 - on insecurities/ concerns ('Can I do part-time work while I study?'; 'So is this the end of my social life?'; 'How do I learn the law?'; 'Is studying law boring?'; 'Am I good enough for law?')
- A simplified online with graphics, including lecturer's photographs as icons and several items 'hidden' until week 3 or 4 (*Deakin Studies Online*); a prominent welcome message indicating where to 'click first'.
- A 'where to start' strategy – 3 clear steps to motivate students to start learning.

From weeks 2 to 3, further steps include:

- Clear explanations of assessment requirements: the provision of a unit-specific developed criterion referenced marking guide adapting pro-formas provided in the Council of Australian Law Deans/ Australian Learning Teaching Council *Legal Education Project in Graduate Attributes & Assessment*, 'sample' papers and preparatory sessions on legal research with Deakin law librarians (as part of the assessment);
- A 'drop-in and see your' tutor – a recent graduate of the law degree;

- The creation of ‘law firms’ on ‘Fun Fridays’ (learner-centered approaches to law)– students complete non-assessable interactive work in lecture time in set firms, from time to time calling a ‘merger’ to allow swapping of ideas. From time-to-time ‘firm mentors’ (later year law students) drop-in to discuss how the firm is going;
- Mid-week a weekly email (‘FYI: For Your Information, First Year Information’) and post to the online learning environment to all first year law students indicating ‘what we did this week’, ‘what we’re doing next week’, and ‘what you could be doing in the meantime!’.

Stage Two: Weeks Four to Ten of Semester

The second stage of the just-in-time engagement strategy is intended to address the loss of momentum, motivation and coupled with the return of first assessments, and is in weeks 4 to 10. At this time of semester, first year students may find themselves challenging their social identity, who they are and what they are doing, and feel stressed, frustrated or ‘a failure’ as a result (Eijkman 2002, p.2). Feelings of inadequacy may cause students to consider withdrawing from their course (Darlaston-Jones *et al.* 2001). Students may have difficulty in juggling work and study (Hillman 2005). The 12-month transition timeline supports students from the ‘settling in’ stage (weeks 1-6) into consolidation (weeks 7-10) by focusing on:

- Ongoing study skills development;
- Assessment feedback: timely, formative, referral to support resources and assistance; and
- Assessment follow-up: supporting confidence, perseverance and resilience based on assessment experience and outcomes.

At this point in the Semester, learner-centered approaches become more critical. Given that, generally, first year students are sure of their reasons for attending university, have a strong desire to do well and a strong sense of purpose (Krause *et al.* 2005, p.2), learner-centered approaches to teaching are likely to be embraced if carefully planned and integrated in their classes. This approach might also connect students with later year students in the same course to ‘normalise’ the experience, within a formal or informal peer-mentoring scheme. ‘Learner-centered’ approaches could include those detailed by Killeen (2007): using discussion in class; small-group work; co-operative learning; problem solving; role-play; case-studies; and/or writing as teaching strategy. At mid-semester, the key to engagement is to employ a wide range of learning resources and varied learning experiences (AUTC, 2001) that are course-relevant, well-prepared, structured and explained.

Overview ‘big picture’ summaries of the unit within the context of the larger degree provide students with renewed purpose. Reassuring students that the experience is ‘normal’ and part of first year assist in the hurdles of mid-semester. This can also be achieved through creating both physical and online places and facilities that allow informal socialisation (Bradley *et al.* 2008, p.79). The middle-of-semester may be an ideal time for an optional ‘field-trip’, excursion or practical experience in which students are involved. An interesting and well-chosen guest lecturer will renew interest and assist in student engagement.

Students should be provided with accessible and user-friendly information on student support services, including generic study skills and information on counselling, student planning and career support. Within a unit, an integrated skills approach, particularly concentrating on time management, study skills, and learning from assessment feedback should be provided. At this time in the semester, teaching staff and student support services work together to deliver a FYE that meets the difficult challenges a first year student would generally face at this time.

In *MLL110*, specific teaching strategies in the second stage include:

- Optional ‘excursions’ open to all First Year Law students to both the Victorian Parliament (related to the topic ‘How are laws made?’) as well as to the Victorian Courts of Law;
- A guest lecturer and ‘question and answer’ session with a retired Judge of the Supreme Court of Victoria;
- The introduction of ‘Destressed! groups’ (to ‘de-stress’, for the ‘distressed’) as a semester-long initiative for integrated skills development - 1 hour optional “bring your lunch and coffee” fun, chatty groups on “hot issues” in first year law. Topics are up for consideration a few days before and could include: How do I get started?, Writing a weekly schedule for your law studies; skills in reading legal cases; skills in reading for your law studies; skills in writing notes in your law studies; skills in completing law assignments; how to get motivated to study; self-check after completing a practice exam; example of a case summary for law notes (Macken, C 2008, ‘Destressed! How to Study Law!’, in *Law Essentials*, accessed 15 September 2009, from <http://www.deakin.edu.au/buslaw/lawessentials>). After an initial discussion, students work in small groups to worksheets to develop skills relating to both the Unit and studying law;
- Integration of student support services into lectures eg. seminars on time management, understanding and learning from feedback on the first assignment in the Unit;
- Connecting students facing difficulties to the student support services – including the Disability Resource Centre, counselling and health services;
- Inviting later year students into class to discuss their experiences at law school, and encouraging students and colleagues Deakin Law Student Society BBQs, competitions and events;
- Relating unit / lecture material to relevant ‘current affairs’, newspaper stories, online resources, television shows;
- Setting up a ‘Facebook First Year Law’ Group (Macken, C 2008, ‘Deakin First Year Law Group’ at *Facebook* accessed 15 September 2009, from <http://deakinedu.facebook.com/group.php?gid=7588889889>). encouraging/responding to a more ‘informal’ means of communication and developing interpersonal relationships with students (Ramsden 2003) than the formal online learning environment ‘Deakin Studies Online’;
- Creating ‘self-tests’ and online quizzes for self-monitored learning in the middle of semester.

Stage Three: Weeks Eleven to Twelve of Semester

The third stage of the just-in-time engagement strategy is one that particularly focuses on the end-of-Semester assessment, further integration of specific skills development and the provision of ‘summaries’ and advice to assist students in consolidating their unit knowledge. Practice exam sessions and sample exam questions and answers assist in setting expectations. At this time, it is also important that students have a sense of purpose and belief in their own abilities (Asmar *et al.* 2000). Together these shape the ‘finishing strongly’ objective of the Deakin timeline.

In *Law Society and Civil Rights*, specific teaching strategies in the second stage include:

- A practice exam session, under pretend exam conditions and time pressure;
- Guidance with Unit specific ‘how to approach the exam’ workshops as part of the *Destressed!* Program;
- Creating ‘overview’ summaries and tests/ quizzes to place the unit in context;
- Referring students to law study resources in *Law Essentials* (Macken, C *Law Essentials*, accessed 15 September 2009, from <http://www.deakin.edu.au/buslaw/lawessentials>) to further assist skills development in the preparation of exam notes, summaries.

Evaluation

In 2008, the introduction of a 'just-in-time' engagement strategy in MLL110 *Law Society and Civil Rights* had an effect on student evaluation ratings, as compared to previous years in this unit. In 2008, 94.6% of respondents answered 'yes' to the question 'I was satisfied with the quality of the teaching in this Unit'. Student evaluation for the question 'Was this Unit Well Taught' was at 4.50/5.00. In previous years, student evaluation in this Unit had been as low as 1.88 (with 29.6% of respondents indicating satisfaction with the quality of teaching in this Unit) in 2005, with the following two years receiving 2.76 and 2.80. The increase in student evaluation from 1.88 to 4.50 was not the result of curriculum change during that time, only a change to the lecturing staff and shift to learner-centered teaching approach. In 2009 the 'just-in-time' strategy was also evaluated at a high level. In particular, new assessment strategies introduced in 2009 increased evaluations specifically relating to the assessment in the Unit. For example, for an assessment as to whether the 'requirements for completing the assessment tasks in this unit were clear', the Unit received an evaluation of 4.49, with the evaluation question as to 'helpful feedback' rating 4.35. The provision of a just-in-time framework online through *Deakin Studies Online* also resulted in a very high evaluation of 4.88 in 2009 from Off-Campus students studying solely online.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to provide a 'just-in-time' engagement framework for a high quality first year student experience. 'Just-in-time' in this context referred to a student-centered timeline for a managed learning environment based on the week-to-week experiences and challenges faced by a first year student at a particular point of time in the semester. The engagement framework in this paper was situated within teaching strategies based on the approach of a discipline-specific unit, a first year law unit at Deakin University, Victoria, although could easily adapt to other first year contexts. The rationale for the engagement framework in this paper was that for the purposes of student engagement and high quality student learning, teaching strategies should be able to adapt to the learning challenges of a first year student *just before it happens, and as it is happening*. By preempting the types of challenges students face at a particular time of the semester, the approach in this paper can provide a seamless transition between *all* aspects of the FYE, to aid early student learning, engagement and success (Kift 2008, p.1). This is part of a co-ordinated, sustained and embedded institutional-wide to approach to first year, as articulated in Deakin University's 12 month Transition Timeline.

At a national level, the points addressed in this paper are significant. Within the volume of research on FYE, the importance of the student experience both generally and in first year is gaining increasing prominence. Excellence and improvement in teaching, learning, the student experience and engagement are significant factors for institutional funding in the LTPF. The imminent introduction of AUSSE provides a national approach to surveying student engagement. Likewise, Australia's international competitiveness depends upon improvements in the field of student experience. As *The Review of Higher Education* points out, a key challenge for the future of higher education is the quality of teaching and the student experience by improvements in student engagement and the total student experience (Bradley *et al.* 2008).

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