

OUM's Tracer Study: A Testimony to a Quality Open and Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

Internally, the quality of a university can be determined by the evaluation made by its own graduates. Having gone through the system and graduated from it, they are in a very good position to appraise the quality of education which they have received in terms of preparing them to become more holistic individuals equipped with relevant lifelong learning skills. An online tracer study conducted by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, in collaboration with all local universities, colleges and polytechnics was carried out via a set of questionnaires to evaluate the responses from Malaysian graduates on the performance of their alma maters. This paper presents the results of the study conducted on the 2006-2008 batches of OUM graduates. It is gratifying to find that OUM graduates are generally satisfied with the services provided by the university and that the level of satisfaction has improved over the three years. OUM study programmes have had a high impact on the holistic development of graduates, in terms of self-readiness such as maturity, reliance and teamwork. OUM's reputation among its graduates is high and almost all (97.4%) would recommend others to pursue higher education at their alma mater. Finally, more than three-quarters of the graduates appear to embrace lifelong learning as indicated by their willingness to attend additional training after graduation. All the above findings serve as testimony of the quality education provided by OUM.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the issue of unemployed graduates in Malaysia has increasingly attracted the attention of the Government, politicians, planners, researchers, academics and the general public. Much of the deliberations and discussions have been linked to the quality of graduates, their attitude and communication skills. This particular concern is in line with the National Higher Education Strategic Plan: Beyond 2020 (Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), 2007) which was launched in August 2007, with the main aim of transforming the country's higher education to enable the country's manpower to

compete effectively at the global level. In the above Strategic Plan, Tun Abdullah Badawi, the former Prime Minister, was quoted as follows:

“However, what we now have to ask ourselves is whether the quality of our education system has moved in tandem with its growth in quantity; whether the younger generation passing through our national education system is adequately equipped to thrive in an increasingly global and competitive environment.” (NEAC Dialogue Forum, 13 January 2004)

Graduate employability is an important aspect of the higher education industry. It evaluates the success and ability of the particular institution in producing work-ready graduates. Generally, employers prefer workers who have generic competencies like interpersonal skills, leadership skills, teamwork, oral and written skills (Lee et al, 2001, cited in Quek, 2005). On the international front, Harvey and Howard (1999) cited in Treleavan and Voola (2008), suggested that graduates' success in their jobs depends more on their personal attributes than on their specific technical disciplines. This is further verified by Barrie (2004) who indicates that the generic graduate attributes will directly relate graduate outcomes to employability. Another study involving an extensive survey of employers of Monash University's business graduates by Crosling and Ward (2002) confirmed that oral communication plays a very significant role in the workplace.

In Malaysia, studies have also concluded that local graduates must have generic attributes. This is proven by an earlier press release by the Malaysian manufacturing and service sectors expressing the view that most employers were unfavourably inclined to employ graduates who do not have generic attributes (New Straits Times, 1998). In another study conducted on a group of employers in Malaysia, it was reported that they expressed the importance of interpersonal skills, knowledge-acquiring skills, flexibility, value-improving skill, practical orientation abilities and cognitive skills as major contributors towards success in work performance (Quek, 2005).

To improve the employability aspects among our graduates, a greater role is being asked of our higher education institutions (HEIs). There are many types of HEIs in Malaysia and the existing ones include: 20 public universities; 40 private universities including college universities; 24 polytechnics; 42 community colleges; and more than 500 private colleges offering up to diploma level programmes. In 2008, a total of 211,532 graduated from the above HEIs, comprising 94,622 from public HEIs, 78,561 from private HEIs, 32,783 from polytechnics and 5,566 from community colleges (MOHE, 2008).

Due to the large number of HEIs, MOHE took the initiative in 2006 to centrally conduct a yearly *National Graduate Tracer Study* on the graduates of both public and private HEIs upon graduation. In 2008, the total number of institutions which took part was 171, of which eight were public and 107 were private HEIs (including private colleges), 20 were polytechnics, 35 were community colleges and one was a teacher training institute. Total respondents for the 2008 study were 139,278 or a response rate of 65.8% of the total number graduates for the year.

Open University Malaysia (OUM) comes under the category of private HEI and it is the only open and distance learning (ODL) institution taking part in the survey. Since its humble beginning in 2001 with an intake of 753 learners, OUM has grown at an impressive rate, with a cumulative intake of 91,374 as at the beginning of the January semester of 2010. Its current enrolment stands at 64,657 of which 95.2% are undergraduates and 4.8% are postgraduates. More than half the undergraduates (56.5%) are teachers under the special Ministry of Education-OUM education programmes and 43.5% are learners from the open market diploma, bachelor and postgraduate programmes. More than 95% of the learners are working adults. Most of them are married and about 55% are females. A large majority (73%) are in the 21-40 age range while 31% are in the 21-30 age range. After its Seventh Convocation in November 2009, the number of OUM graduates totalled 19,749.

Unlike public HEIs, OUM provides opportunities primarily to working adults to continue their education for various reasons, the most common being to improve their knowledge and skills for career promotion or shift to a better job in order to attain an improved quality of life. A major responsibility of OUM, in the eyes of its stakeholders, is to provide a satisfying and meaningful study experience, contribute to the achievement of short and long-term career goals and also to provide better workplace skills to their graduates. In this regard, it is essential to measure the institution's success in achieving these goals. It is customary to have learners complete an evaluation of the course or programme of study that they had undertaken. This type of evaluation usually focuses on issues such as course content, instructional materials, use of ICT, course tutors/facilitators and others. For this purpose, a yearly Importance-Satisfaction survey is conducted (Latifah *et. al*, 2007; 2008 and Ramli *et. al*, 2008) to identify institutional strengths for marketing purposes, and weaknesses for improvement purposes. However, even though this kind of feedback provides useful information to the organisation, it does not measure the outputs and outcomes of education in line with those highlighted by Schomburg (2003), who identified the outputs as attributes such as knowledge and skills, and outcomes as transition to employment, work experience and service to society.

OUM has been an active participant in the above tracer study and has gained invaluable feedback on how its educational process has impacted its graduates. So far, since 2006, OUM has participated in three tracer studies within the years 2006 to 2008. The reasons which compel OUM to conduct its graduate tracer study are many and among them include the following: Firstly, to use it as a tool to gauge the perceptions of learners on curriculum, teaching and assessment which happen to be the key determinants in their approach to learning, and to measure the quality of the outputs and outcomes of the learning process. Secondly, to establish the contributions the university has made to its learners in their career promotions and in pursuing their studies to a higher level or in gaining entry to other institutions of higher learning. Thirdly, to guide OUM's strategic planning exercise with a view to improve programmes and services to existing students. Finally, to benchmark OUM's performance with other institutions and at the same time, to dispel the myth that open and distance learning is of lower quality compared to other conventional learning.

OBJECTIVE OF PAPER

The objective of the paper is to report on the results of the 2008 Tracer Study in which OUM had participated. The results of the study are compared to those of 2006 and 2007, where available, to identify any significant changes in the quality of the services provided. Based on the analysis, pertinent issues and challenges of the institution are highlighted and relevant recommendations are put forth for further improvements.

METHODOLOGY

The online questionnaire of the Tracer Study was posted in the MOHE website (SKPG Online: <http://graduat.mohe.gov.my>) and was linked to OUM's portal, under a special Convocation section in its Learning Management System or *myLMS*. OUM graduates were given three to four weeks to complete the online questionnaire before they collect their graduation gowns. Upon submission of the fully completed questionnaire, graduates were asked to print out the verification slip as proof that they have submitted their survey forms. OUM's primary role was to monitor the progress of the online survey and carry out the required analysis of the raw data provided by the MOHE.

In the survey, respondents were requested to rate their responses to several statements based on the Likert-type scale of 1 to 5; with 1 (very dissatisfied), 2 (not satisfied), 3 (moderately satisfied), 4 (satisfied) and 5 (very satisfied). For the impact of OUM programmes on the graduates, respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5; with 1 (very non-influential); 2 (non-influential); 3 (moderately influential); 4 (influential); and 5 (very influential) for 12 items. On OUM's reputation, the respondents were requested to rate 5 statements related to their perception of OUM according to the scale of 1 to 5; with 1 (very non-reputable); 2 (non-reputable); 3 (moderately reputable); 4 (reputable); and 5 (very reputable). A total of 4,506 OUM graduates who graduated in 2008 were requested to respond to the survey.

RESULTS

A total of 3,097 OUM graduates responded to this survey, the majority being bachelor's degree graduates (97.4%). The rest were diploma (1.7%) and master's degree graduates (0.9%). These respondents made up 14.7% of total respondents from the private HEIs, comprising 36.1% males and 63.9% females. Among the undergraduate respondents, 64.9% were Malays, 12.3% Chinese, 9.0% Indians and 12.9% other Bumiputera. The postgraduate respondents were more equally distributed, with 43.3% Malays, 38.3% Chinese, 13.3% Indians and 3.3% other races. Almost all respondents (98.9%) were working and only a handful (1.1%) were unemployed.

Overall Satisfaction

The overall mean satisfaction score for 2008 was 4.1 out of 5.0 (Table 1). Learners rated the four dimensions of *curriculum*; *assessment system*; *teaching staff* and *knowledge skills* as satisfied with the mean score exceeding 4.0, while *facilities* and *career guidance* were given a rating of moderately satisfied with mean scores of 3.7 and 3.8 respectively. Compared to the previous years of 2006 and 2007, the overall mean satisfaction score was higher in 2008, indicating improvement in the overall curriculum

and quality of services. A closer look revealed that except for *assessment system* and *teaching and learning* ratings which remained at 4.2 and 4.1 respectively, the other dimensions were rated higher than those of the previous years, giving an improved overall rating of 4.1.

Table 1: Satisfaction Mean Scores by Dimension

DIMENSIONS	2006	2007	2008
Curriculum	4.1	4.0	4.1
Assessment System	4.2	4.2	4.2
Career Guidance	3.5	3.5	3.8
Teaching & Learning (Tutors/Facilitators)	4.1	4.1	4.1
Facilities	3.2	3.6	3.7
Knowledge and Skills	4.1	4.1	4.4
Overall Mean	3.9	3.9	4.1

Curriculum

In the curriculum dimension for 2008, all the four items were rated satisfactory (>4.0), except for "*Balance between Theoretical and Practical/Application Component*" which was rated moderately satisfactory (3.9) (Table 2). However, while the rating decreased in 2007 from 2006, it has improved in 2008. The rating for *Suitability of the Study Programme* remained somewhat the same in all the three years; that of *Compulsory University Courses* declined while that of *Preparing Students for Working World* increased.

Table 2: Satisfaction Mean Scores for Curriculum Items

CURRICULUM	2006	2007	2008
Suitability of the Study Programme	4.3	4.2	4.2
Balance between theoretical and practical/ application component	4.0	3.8	3.9
Compulsory University courses	NA	4.3	4.2
Preparing students for working world	NA	4.0	4.2
Overall Mean	4.1	4.0	4.1

Assessment System

The graduates were generally satisfied with the assessment system used in OUM with a score of 4.2 in all the items (Table 3). The ratings have remained the same over the three years.

Table 3: Satisfaction Mean Scores for Assessment System Items

ASSESSMENT SYSTEM	2006	2007	2008
Transparent, fair and easily understood	4.2	4.2	4.2
Marking schemes for assignments/test/practical etc.	4.2	4.2	4.2
Marking schemes for examinations	4.2	4.2	4.2
Overall Mean	4.2	4.2	4.2

Teaching and Learning (Tutors/Facilitators)

In 2008, graduates were generally satisfied with teaching and learning (tutors/facilitators); where 12 out of 13 items were given a rating of 4.0 and above (Table 4). Only one item, “*Ability to relate teaching to current practices in the industry,*” was rated moderately satisfactory. Over the three years, the ratings of seven items remained the same, three marginally declined and three others marginally increased.

Table 4: Satisfaction Mean Scores of Teaching and Learning (Tutors/Facilitators) Items

TEACHING AND LEARNING	2006	2007	2008
Balance in both practical and theoretical knowledge	4.1	4.0	4.1
Interaction with students	4.2	4.2	4.2
Innovation/creativity in teaching	4.0	4.0	4.0
Ability to relate teaching to current practices in the industry	4.0	3.9	3.9
Ability to expose/update students on current knowledge	4.0	4.0	4.1
Delivery skills	4.0	4.0	4.0
Online interaction	NA	4.2	4.2
Qualifications	4.2	4.4	4.4
Communication skills in Malay language	4.4	4.2	4.2
Communication skills in English language	4.2	4.1	4.1
Quality of academic counseling system	NA	4.0	4.0
Academic staff easily contacted outside tutorial hours	NA	4.1	4.1
Academic counselling	NA	4.0	4.1
Overall Mean	4.1	4.1	4.1

Facilities

In terms of facilities provided by OUM, the graduates were moderately satisfied with them (Table 5). Only two items were rated satisfactory (≥ 4.0), while the rest were rated moderately satisfactory. Among the lowest rated items were *cafeteria/canteen*, *parking* and *library*. From 2006 to 2008, only one item recorded a decline in its rating, four recorded an improvement while the other four remained the same.

Table 5: Satisfaction Mean Scores of Facility Items, 2008

FACILITIES	2006	2007	2008
Library	3.6	3.7	3.6
Online resources	NA	NA	4.0
Online digital library services	NA	NA	3.9
Laboratory (computer, science, etc.)	3.6	3.8	3.8
Lecture hall/tutorial room	3.9	3.9	3.9
Cafeteria/canteen	3.1	3.1	3.2
Parking	3.4	3.6	3.6
Campus security	3.7	3.9	3.9
Integrated online learning	NA	4.1	4.1
Conducive learning space	NA	3.9	3.9
ICT facilities	NA	3.8	3.8
Overall Mean	3.2	3.6	3.7

Knowledge and Skills

The graduates were generally satisfied with the knowledge and skills acquired from their study programmes, particularly in the areas of *Malay Language*; *Team/group work* and *Inculcation and practising of positive values*. The only item that they were moderately satisfied with was *English Language* (Table 6). The ratings over the three-year period remained somewhat constant. However, that of *English Language* has been rated consistently lowest at the moderately satisfactory level.

Impact of OUM Programmes on Graduates' Self-Readiness

OUM's programmes have had very strong impact on the graduates' self-readiness with an influence rating ranging from 4.3 to 4.5, giving an average of 4.4 in 2008 (Table 7). It is very heartening to note that this high rating remained somewhat the same for the three years under review.

Table 6: Satisfaction Mean Scores of Knowledge and Skills Items Acquired from Study Programme

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS	2006	2007	2008
ICT skills	3.8	4.1	4.0
Malay Language	4.5	4.7	4.6
English Language	3.7	3.6	3.8
Interpersonal communication skills	4.1	4.1	4.1
Creative and critical thinking skills	4.0	4.1	4.1
Problem solving skills	4.1	4.1	4.1
Analytical skills	4.0	4.0	4.0
Team work/group work	4.3	4.3	4.3
Inculcation and practising of positive values	4.3	4.3	4.3
Exposure to general knowledge and current issues	4.1	4.2	4.2
Overall Mean	4.1	4.1	4.4

Table 7: Impact of OUM Programmes on Graduates' Self-Readiness

GRADUATES' SELF-READINESS	2006	2007	2008
Develop self-confidence	4.3	4.3	4.3
Enhance self-maturity	4.4	4.4	4.4
Develop self resiliency	4.4	4.3	4.3
Become more knowledgeable	4.5	4.5	4.5
Enhance interest in learning	4.5	4.4	4.4
More sensitive towards current affairs	4.4	4.4	4.4
Ability to be independent/self reliance	4.4	4.3	4.4
Creative and critical thinking	4.3	4.4	4.3
Ready to face the working world and challenges	4.4	4.3	4.3
Problem solving and decision making	4.3	4.4	4.3
Teamwork/group working	4.4	4.3	4.4
Effective communication	4.4	4.3	4.3
Overall Mean	4.4	4.4	4.4

OUM's Reputation

Four out of five statements on OUM's reputation received an average score of 4.1, which implies that OUM graduates have a high regard for OUM's reputation (Table 8).

The statement *As a Reputable Research Institution* received the lowest mean score of 4.0. The scores for 2006 graduates are not available but all 2008 ratings were higher than those of 2007.

Table 8: OUM's Reputation Mean Scores

Reputation	2006	2007	2008
As a reputable research institution	NA	3.9	4.0
As a quality education provider	NA	4.0	4.1
As an excellent academic institution	NA	4.0	4.1
Reputation of the field	NA	4.0	4.1
General perception	NA	4.0	4.1
Overall Mean	NA	4.0	4.1

Recommend Others to Study at OUM

Almost all of OUM's 2008 and 2007 (> 97.0%) graduates recommended others to study at their alma mater (Table 11). This is a testament to the quality of the programmes and services provided by OUM to its learners.

Table 11: Would OUM Graduates Recommend Others to Pursue Higher Education at their Institution?

Recommend to Others	2006	2007	2008
Yes	NA	97.2%	97.4%
No	NA	2.8%	2.6%
Total	NA	100.0%	100.0%

Willingness to Attend Additional Training after Graduation

It is gratifying to note that more than three-quarters of the 2008 and 2007 graduate respondents were willing to attend additional training after graduation (Table 12). This is in line with OUM's efforts in inculcating the culture of lifelong learning among its graduates.

Table 12: OUM Graduates' Willingness to Attend Additional Training, 2008

Willingness to attend additional training	2006	2007	2008
Yes	NA	84.9%	78.0%
No	NA	15.1%	22.0%
Total	NA	100.0%	100.0%

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

A standard tracer study is made up of two phases. The first is an impact study that seeks to determine whether graduates are satisfied with the study programmes which they have successfully gone through at university. The second is a career development study to determine the extent to which the programmes have helped them secure employment of their choice or advance in their careers. This study focuses on the first phase where OUM graduates were asked to rate several attributes of their study programmes and how these have influenced their competencies, skills and self-readiness.

Industries in Malaysia are looking for excellent workers who are able to compete in the ever challenging environment. Though the large majority of OUM learners are already working, they need to enhance their competencies and skills to stay relevant. Thus, it is vital for OUM to place greater emphasis on developing skills compatible with industry demands. Boettcher (2006, p. 105) suggests that trends in distance education will be on “updating knowledge and skills, building perspectives, contextual problem solving, networking” and a shift to “competency-based outcomes.” Plans to incorporate these attributes will need the input of graduates who have entered the job market and are able to assess the relationships between their education and professional competencies. One of the tools used to develop the skills is the academic curriculum, which is a vehicle through which attributes can be transferred during the learning process that would prepare graduates when they enter the workforce (Fallows *et al*, 2000), or when they are to excel in their career.

In this study, it was shown that graduates are generally satisfied with the curriculum offered by OUM. Many factors have contributed to the relevancy of the curriculum. Among them is the composition of the Board of Studies for each programme which consists of academics, professionals and industry experts. OUM also engages industry professionals as its subject matter experts, academic staff, tutors and facilitators. Another major initiative is in developing joint programmes with industry such as Nestle, Aeon-Jusco and Dumex. Deliberate efforts are also channelled towards coming up with innovative programmes to cater to its diverse learner population. Some of the conventional programmes are consolidated with professional components so as to produce programmes which are truly relevant to their career needs. Examples include Bachelor in Mathematics with Management, Bachelor of Information Technology with Management and many others.

Since its inception, OUM has been practising a learner-centered approach to learning, whereby the focus is on learners. The methodologies used in this approach include problem-based learning, case study and collaborative learning which seek to develop and enhance critical and analytical thinking. Its curriculum design adopts an outcome-based approach, which means that for each programme, there is a list of what the learners are expected to be able to do at the end of their programme of study. For each learning outcome, appropriate teaching and learning activities are developed. Assessment procedures to evaluate the learning outcomes are then developed. The major objective of evaluation will be to see if the programme learning outcomes are addressed in at least some of the courses.

The graduates said that the teaching and learning performance of tutors and facilitators generally met their expectations, except for the *ability to relate teaching to current practices of the industry*. The tutor training and monitoring exercises carried out by the Centre for Tutor Management and Development (CTMD) has contributed significantly to these good ratings. In order to ensure that existing learners get the best out of the teaching and learning, the faculties will need to review and enhance the contents and examples given in the modules, the assignment questions and also the other exercises so that they are more relevant to current industry practices.

Except for *English Language*, which received a rating of 3.8, the other aspects of knowledge and skills gained from the study programmes are satisfactory. This in a way reflects the quality of the curriculum as well as teaching and learning. With regard to *English Language*, OUM has been advocating and intensifying the use of the language among its learners, tutors and facilitators, even though teaching and learning in English has yet to be fully implemented. The primary reason for this is that some learners still prefer the use of Bahasa Malaysia for tutorial discussions, answering examination questions and preparing assignments, even though the print modules are in English. OUM has ascertained that the medium of instruction for the coming years will be English and will introduce appropriate interventions to help learners with low English proficiency so that they can cope better with their studies. Currently, there are four English courses that are made compulsory for all OUM learners, namely, "English for Oral Communication," "English for Written Communication," "English for Science and Technical Purposes" and "English for Workplace Communication," which are intended to help them cope with the use of the language in all the other courses.

Another important factor that contributes to enriching learning experience is the tangible aspect of the institution, its aesthetics as well as functional aspects. In the three-year study period, it was found that *facilities* as a dimension was rated lowest among all others. This result also applies to the other higher education institutions (Abdul Razak and Shawira, 2007). For OUM, this is not totally unexpected, for during that period, a large number of its learning centres were rented premises and only a few were owned by the university. Some of the rented premises were found to be non-conducive, in that the classrooms were small, the teaching and learning facilities, computer laboratories and library facilities were not the best and most of the centres lacked proper parking space. Since then, OUM has been actively renovating and buying buildings to replace the rented learning centres. Its goal was to have its own learning centre in every state capital in the country by 2010. For the remaining rented learning centres in smaller towns, OUM will enter into a longer-term contract which will enable it to undertake necessary renovations, thus making the centres more conducive for learners.

Another dimension that was rated low in the study was *career counselling*. This result is also not entirely unexpected, since the majority of OUM learners are working adults, whereby career counselling may not be of high importance to them. OUM has long recognised this fact and thus does not have a dedicated centre to cater for it. However, some form of career counselling is made available to learners at their respective faculties to help them match their study programmes with their career paths.

A truly gratifying result of the study was the fact that 97.4% of OUM graduates would recommend OUM to others to pursue studies at their alma mater. This is not just a

measure of loyalty but also of their firm and whole-hearted belief that OUM has done very well for them and so, they wish to see others benefit from it as well.

OUM also takes pride in the fact that 78% of its graduates indicated that they are willing to attend additional training after their graduation. This clearly shows that OUM has been able to instil in its graduates the lifelong learning culture which is the basic philosophy of the institution. This has been facilitated by OUM's blended learning mode which encompasses self-managed learning and e-learning which are the mainstays of lifelong learning.

Overall, OUM graduates rated their institution above average with an average score of 4.1. This is gratifying for both the university staff and management who had worked very hard to ensure that OUM, being the first open and distance learning (ODL) university in Malaysia, attains a high reputation in the academic world. The exponential increase in learner intake since its inception is testimony to the quality of programmes and services offered by OUM. To continue to sustain the good performance, OUM benchmarks itself against the best ODL institutions in the world. Currently, it participates in several institutional audit exercises guided by the Code of Practice for Programme Accreditation (COPPA), the Code of Practice for Institutional Audit (COPIA) and Commonwealth of Learning Performance Indicators (COLPI) to ensure quality processes and products. In addition, four of its departments have maintained the ISO-9001 Certification since 2006.

CONCLUSION

A higher education institution (HEI) which strives to provide quality education should strive to fully understand the needs of its learners. One of the best ways to do so is through direct feedback from the learners themselves, particularly those who have successfully gone through and completed their study programmes with the institution. Having gone through the system and graduated from it, they are in a very good position to appraise the quality of education that they have received in terms of preparing them to become more holistic individuals in the workplace.

The online tracer study conducted by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, in collaboration with all the country's HEIs provides a very good opportunity for OUM to obtain the necessary feedback from its graduates. The study confirmed that OUM was making a significant contribution to its learners by providing opportunities to improve their skills and knowledge, not only to perform better in their careers but also in providing the opportunity to pursue their studies to a higher level. A majority (78.0%) indicated that they will continue to attend additional training after their graduation; this reflects the success of OUM in inculcating the culture of lifelong learning among its learners. The most gratifying outcome of the study was that almost all graduates (97.4%) indicated that they would recommend others to study at their alma mater.

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