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Academic problems faced by foundation year students in some private higher education institutions in the Sultanate of Oman

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Abstract:

The study aimed to identify the academic problems confronting the foundational year students in some of private institutions of higher education in Oman. The descriptive approach was applied through developing a questionnaire, and then distributed to a sample of (481)male and female students enrolling the first academic year (the foundational year) within three higher education institutions (A'Sharqiyah University, Al- Buraimi University, and Mazoon College).

Results showed that the most significant academic problems were those related to organizational and administrative aspects, where these problems ranked with varying scores. The organizational problems ranked the first, with high score; the problems related to the curriculum ranked the second, with medium score; those related to academic staff ranked the third, also with medium score, finally, the lowest rank went to teaching skills, with medium score. Moreover, results revealed that there are statistically significant differences regarding the academic problems attributed to the education institution variable, while there was not any statistically significant differences according to gender variable. The results of analysis showed no statistically significant impact of integration of both variables (the education institution and gender). Study stressed the need of setting effective training programs for both the academics and students, through which the academic environment could be organized

Keywords: problem, academic problems; foundational year.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the world is experiencing a revived information revolution that contributes to bringing about ever-growing and accelerating changes in all areas of human life, including the educational systems. These systems have experienced a variety of challenges and shifts, such as rapid progress and development in most areas of life, among which technology and knowledge fields, communication networks, as well as quality and excellence management. Consequently, they have led to the inclusion of many scientific and knowledge aspects that are interrelated and become intertwined with each other (Al- Hadhrami and Al- Toubi 2026).

Therefore, the education institutions – in all level- have faced those difficulties, which in turn impose them to conduct a targeted process of development and change, in order to cope with what is new and modern; to meet the global competition, and to understand these changes carefully to be reflected on the real practice. This could be done by achieving pedagogic and educational goals that seek to graduate self-aware individuals, who can perform an effective role in their society, keep pace with the rapid and relentless transformations globally (Mukhtar, 2014). All these factors helped in creating scientific and educational evolutions in field of education (Al- Hadhrami and Al-Toubi, 2026).

Modern education has placed the learner at the heart of the educational process, as his/her role is no longer that of a passive recipient, but rather he/she has become a focal point for all components of education. This comes in the context of an unprecedented flow of knowledge and technology around the world, which has enforced the educational system to prepare the individual to meet this renewed reality. In this context, concepts have emerged that have become indispensable, such as self-learning, critical thinking, problem-solving capabilities, and other strategies, which had reshaped the perspective on the role of the school and university, and the nature of the skills that the individual should possess today (Al-Shammari and Al-Ayasrah, 2013).

Tertiary institutions occupy a pivotal position within human development framework for any community. The university constitutes the top of educational hierarchy, as well as the main pillar for building and qualifying human. Today, the role of the university goes beyond the limits of knowledge transfer, to include shaping and refining the student's personality at mental, social and professional levels. The purpose is no longer just to fill minds with information, but rather to develop a person who possesses thinking and analytical tools, able to involve

effectively in his/ her community, hold his/ her responsibility towards himself and others, and can adopt the acquired knowledge to confront the various practical life challenges (Al- Zuyood, 2015).

The higher education institutions, especially colleges of education and arts, have become increasingly concerned with their students by offering them academic and training programs to improve their mental and intellectual abilities, as well as their highest career potential. However, the presence of some problems that individuals face is an obstacle to the effectiveness and adequacy of these programs. Among these problems are academic problems that are represented in the inability to achieve academic attainment resulting from the complexity of some courses or the deficit in teaching approaches and methods, which in turn cause a lack of proper understanding of scientific subjects. This is what Wingate's study (2015) proved regarding critical thinking studies, which may sometimes lead to the loss of self-confidence and ability, and thus being incompatible with the academic environment (Al-Shater, 2019).

The undergraduate level is considered as the most critical step through the student's career, as it serves to provide true opportunities for both personal and academic developments. However, the student can struggle some unusual challenges or difficulties, which put him/ her under certain pressures that might influence his/ her academic path (Al- Harbi et. al., 2013).

The problems faced by undergraduate students have accounted for special attention in the humanities and social studies, due to their complexity and diversity. These problems stem from various factors, including the student's personality, family, environment, academic status, and cultural and social background. Several factors contribute to the emergence of these problems, most notably parental neglect and a perceived weakness in the performance of various nurturing institutions, whether familial, school, or university. In this term, Voorhees and Zhou (2000) argued that 6.73% of students have changed in their targets when they enrolled to college, because they faced such problems that could strongly affect the development of internal and external competencies. In addition, a study conducted by Al- Dhalei (2020) confirmed a set of academic issues, which have the potential effect on student's attainment and development.

The sources of problems are varied. They include economic, social and personal aspects. Some of them are related to the student him/herself, where others are associated with the tutors, or the course material. Among the most prominent reasons for this is the student's disconnection from their usual friendships when they

were at high school. Furthermore, the academic life gives students a wider margin of independence, but it also entails making crucial decisions such as choosing a major, managing their time, and the obligation to attend (Al-Alawi, 2023). Given the importance of these problems in shaping a student's path from their earliest years, various studies have examined and analyzed these problems, including the following:

Results obtained through Ramadan's study (2018) revealed an inverse correlation between the problems perceived by first-year students and their academic attainment and attendance. The study also demonstrated that regular attendance could directly contributes to improved academic attainment.

Al- Anqari (2017) aimed to explore the academic and administrative constraints that students in the preparatory year at King Saud University face. The results revealed that the high cost of textbooks, and the complexity of course requirements ranked the first among others. Students' responses varied according to academic path, living level and place.

While a study conducted by Al- Rooqi (2016) had focused mainly on the first academic year students in Afif Governorate's colleges, and concluded that students' agreement on the presence of academic issues ranked moderate score, as well as revealing a significant decline in cumulative grade point averages (GPAs) among more than half of the sample.

In the same context, Al- Dhafeeri (2014) studied the academic problems among classroom teacher Department at Al-Baath University. Results revealed no statistically significant differences according to secondary certificate variable, while revealed significant differences for academic year variable among first year students.

Based on these findings, the current study aims to explore the nature of the academic problems confronted by foundation academic year students and their impact on their attainment, from the perspective of students at the University of Sharqiyah and the University of Buraimi in Oman.

2. Research Problem and Questions

The foundation year is a crucial starting point in the university journey, to prepare and equip students for enrolling their chosen academic specialization confidently. It is not merely a transitional phase, but a true opportunity to acquire diverse practical and theoretical skills that enable them to integrate into the college environment and actively contribute to its activities as well as to the institutions of

their surrounding community (Smith, 2019).

Therefore, Oman has worked earlier to prioritize and develop educational system at all levels, especially higher education, to develop individuals' capabilities and prepare them for the labor market. The foundation for developing a national workforce capable of navigating life's challenges is evident, as described in the National Education Strategy 2020/2040, which prioritizes the development of higher education and creating qualified human resources. The educational system aims to prepare a generation possessing knowledge, skills, and values, capable of addressing the needs of a rapidly changing world, while keeping national identity and cultural heritage, and contributing to the progress of humanity (Al- Hadhrami and Al-Toubi, 2026).

In this context, preparatory programs play a role that extends beyond academic qualification to include character building and the development of social connections, thus preparing students to shoulder the responsibilities of university life and the job market. However, the transition from secondary school to this new environment is not without its challenges. Many foundation year students find themselves facing psychological, academic, and social pressures resulted from the varied nature and requirements of the two stages. This has been confirmed by several studies, such as Al-Dhalei (2020), Kahu et al. (2018), and Baik et al. (2019), which have demonstrated that these problems directly impact students' academic performance and can lead to failing, academic probation, expulsion, or an extended study period.

Therefore, this study aims to answer the main question: What academic problems do foundation year students at the University of Sharqiyah and the University of Buraimi ,year students face in some private higher education institutions in the Sultanate of Oman?

To answer this overarching question, the study is guided by the following sub-questions:

1.What is the degree of academic problems faced by foundation year students in some private higher education institutions in the Sultanate of Oman, related to academic staff, teaching skills, course materials, and organizational and administrative aspects, from the students' perspective?

2.Are there statistically significant differences at the significance level (α = 0.05) in the mean responses of foundation year students regarding academic problems attributable to the variables of educational institution and gender?

2.1 Study Objectives

- To identify the degree of academic problems faced by foundation year students in some private higher education institutions in the Sultanate of Oman, related to academic staff, teaching skills, course materials, and organizational and administrative aspects, from the students' perspective.
- To determine the degree of statistically significant differences at the significance level (α = 0.05) in the mean responses of foundation year students regarding academic problems, attributable to the variables of educational institution and gender.

2.2 Research Significance

- Theoretically: This study encompasses a range of intellectual and philosophical frameworks concerning academic problems and their various sources. It represents an attempt to enrich the Arabic library with a contemporary study on the academic challenges faced by foundation year students at Al Sharqiyah University, Al Buraimi University, and Mazoon College in the Sultanate of Oman.
- Practically: This study can contribute to bring more focus on the academic problems experienced by foundation year students at Al Sharqiyah University, Al Buraimi University, and Mazoon College in the Sultanate of Oman. The significance of these findings lies in mentoring decision-makers in these institutions based on reliable data that enables them to take effective and well-considered actions to address these problems and mitigate their consequences.

2.3 Limitations of the study:

- Objective limits: Academic problems of foundation year students at Al Sharqiyah University and Al Buraimi University
- Time limits: academic year 2024- 2025
- Spatial limits: Al Sharqiyah University / Al Buraimi University / Mazoon Collegein Oman
- Human limits: First-year students at Al Sharqiyah University, Al Buraimi University, and Mazoon College

2.3 Study concepts

The problem: it can be defined as the gap between the actual study of the research and the information that needs to be addressed to reach the desired knowledge (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Academic problems: a set of challenges undergraduate students might struggle during their academic period. They are often reflected as decline in levels of attainment, inability to understand curricula correctly due to a group of factors that affect either the student or the learning environment (Al- Alawi, 2023).

They can be defined procedurally as a set of constraints faced by students during their time at the higher education institutions that might hinder their academic success and as a result continue their learning process.

The foundation year: the first year of a student's learning journey in higher education institutions, takes place in a transitional learning environment especifically designed to develop the student's academic skills and equip them with the essential skills and competencies needed to meet the demands of higher education. It also aims to bridge educational gaps arising from the diverse social, cultural, and educational backgrounds from which the student comes (Thomas, 2023).

Procedurally, it can be defined as the transitional phase in education, the goal of which is to bridge the skills and knowledge gap among graduating students through an intensive program focused on empowering them with the academic and professional tools that ensure their continued success in higher education and their ability to meet the demands of the future labor market.

3 Methods:

3.1 Study approach:

The study adopted a descriptive approach, which describes and interprets phenomena in metadata manner, as it is the most suitable approach for this type of research.

3.2 Population and sample of the study:

The study population consisted of Al Sharqiyah University, Al Buraimi University, and Mazoon College. According to the official websites of these universities, the study population comprised approximately 2,452 students, distributed as follows: Al Sharqiyah University (approximately 1,300 students), Al Buraimi University (950 students), and Mazoon College (202 students).

The study sample consisted of 481 students, distributed across the universities as follows: Al Buraimi University (168), Al Sharqiyah University (146), and Mazoon College (167) students. The sample was taken using a simple random method.

3.4 Study tool’s reliability and stability:

The reliability of the study instrument was verified to ascertain the degree of internal consistency of its paragraphs, using two statistical methods commonly used in educational and psychological research: Cronbach's Alpha coefficient and the split-half reliability method using the corrected Spearman-Brown coefficient. These two methods are among the most widely used for measuring the reliability of multi-paragraphs scales, as they provide accurate indicators of the instrument's stability and internal consistency (Cronbach, 1951; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Table (1) shows the reliability results using both methods:

Table (1): study tool reliability and stability

No.	Theme	Cronbach's Alpha coefficient	Split-half reliability
1	faculty staff	0.597	0.657
2	teaching skills	0.776	0.796
3	course materials	0.632	0.719
4	organizational and administrative	0.403	0.312
	whole measure	0.820	0.843

The results of Cronbach's alpha coefficient, as shown in the previous table, indicate that the scale as a whole possesses a high degree of reliability ($\alpha = 0.82$), a value considered very good according to established methodological standards in educational and psychological research. This demonstrates the tool's high degree of internal consistency and its suitability for use in statistical analysis and drawing conclusions.

At the sub-aspect level, reliability values ranged from acceptable to good. The "Problems Related to Teaching Skills" sub-aspect achieved the highest reliability score ($\alpha = 0.776$), followed by the "course materials" sub-aspect ($\alpha = 0.632$), and then the "Faculty staff" sub-aspect ($\alpha = 0.597$). These values are statistically acceptable given the limited number of paragraphs in some sub-aspects. Methodological literature indicates that alpha coefficient is affected by the number of paragraphs, and that shorter scales often register lower values than longer ones (Cortina, 1993; Streiner, 2003).

The Organizational and Administrative Problems theme recorded a relatively low reliability coefficient ($\alpha = 0.403$), which can be explained by several methodological and scientific considerations, most notably:

1. The limited number of paragraphs: This theme consists of only four paragraphs. Numerous methodological studies have confirmed that a small number of paragraphs often leads to a lower alpha coefficient, even if the paragraphs are related in content (Cortina, 1993; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

2. The diversity of paragraphs content: The theme addresses multiple organizational and administrative issues (such as classrooms, teaching methods, and organizational aspects). These dimensions are conceptually related but not entirely homogeneous, which reduces the inter- paragraphs correlations and affects the reliability value (Schmitt, 1996).

3. The Contextual Nature of Organizational Problems: Organizational and administrative problems are inherently contextual and vary depending on the educational institution and the university environment. This makes student responses more diverse and less consistent compared to more directly educational topics, such as teaching skills.

Justification for Retaining the Fourth Theme despite Low Reliability

Despite the low reliability coefficient, the researchers did not exclude the fourth theme for the following reasons:

• The tool is multidimensional, and it is not expected that all themes will achieve similarly high reliability scores, especially when the nature of the measured dimensions differs (Schmitt, 1996).

• The literature indicates that alpha coefficient is not the sole criterion for judging the quality of a theme, and that the theoretical and structural significance of the content should be considered when making exclusion decisions (Hair et al., 2019).

•The organizational and administrative theme forms an essential part of the study's theoretical framework, and its exclusion would lead to an unjustified reduction of the concept of academic problems faced by foundation year students. In exploratory or descriptive studies, a reliability coefficient of less than 0.50 is considered relatively acceptable if the theme is theoretically supported and serves the study's objectives (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994).

Accordingly, the fourth theme was retained in the statistical analysis, with the caveat that its limited reliability was noted when discussing the results.

3.5Tool Validity

The validity of the study instrument was verified after its application to the study sample, using statistical validity methods appropriate to the nature of the data and the research objectives. The study relied on internal consistency validity by calculating the correlation coefficients between each paragraph and the total score of its respective theme. Construct validity was also verified by examining the correlation coefficients between the sub-themes and the total scale score. These methods are among the most common and appropriate for verifying the validity of multidimensional tools in educational and psychological studies (Hair et al., 2019; DeVellis, 2017). Table (2) presents the results of internal consistency validity (paragraph-theme).

3.6Description of the tool (questionnaire)

The study instrument consisted of (18) statements divided into (4) axes as follows: The first axis: Problems related to the teaching staff, which included (4) statements, the second axis: Problems related to teaching skills, which included (5) statements, the third axis: Problems related to teaching courses, which included (5) statements, and the last axis: Problems related to organizational matters, which included (5) statements.

Table (2) Correlation coefficients of paragraphs with the total score of their themes (internal consistency validity)

No.	Theme	No. of paragraphs	(R)	Significance level
1	faculty staff	4	0.31 – 0.58	p < .01
2	teaching skills	5	0.45 – 0.72	p < .01
3	course materials	5	0.34 – 0.66	p < .01
4	organizational and administrative	4	0.32 – 0.54	p < .01

The results in table (2) indicate that the correlation coefficients between the paragraphs and the overall score for their respective themes were positive and statistically significant at the ($p < 0.01$) level, with values ranging from 0.31 to 0.72. These values fall within the methodologically acceptable limits for assessing the internal consistency of paragraphs. These results demonstrate that all paragraphs contribute substantially to measuring the dimensions for which they were designed, and no paragraph exhibited low or statistically insignificant correlation coefficients that would ensure exclusion.

These results are consistent with the methodological literature indicating that correlation coefficients exceeding 0.30 are a suitable indicator of paragraphs validity and consistency with the conceptual framework of the theme to which it belongs, particularly in multidimensional scales (Hair et al., 2019; DeVellis, 2017).

Therefore, it can be concluded that the study instrument possesses a good degree of internal consistency at both the paragraphs and theme levels, thus supporting its suitability for use in statistical analysis and achieving the study's objectives.

Results of Construct Validity (Theme × Total Score)

Construct validity was verified by calculating Pearson's correlation coefficients between the scores of the four themes and the total scale score, and the results were as follows:

Table (3): Results of Construct Validity (Theme × Total Score)

No.	Theme	Correlation coefficient with total score
1	faculty staff	0.64
2	teaching skills	0.78

3	course materials	0.71
4	organizational and administrative	0.55

All correlation coefficients are positive and statistically significant at the level of (0.01)

The résulte of the validité of interna consistance indicateur that the paragraphes of the Tool are logically interconnected and consistent with the themes to which they belong, which indicates the soundness of the wording and the accuracy of the paragraphs' representation of the measurement areas. The results of the construct also confirm that the four themes represent interconnected dimensions of a single concept: the academic problems facing foundation-year students, with each theme retaining its conceptual specificity.

Although the correlation coefficient for the fourth theme (organizational and administrative problems) with the overall score was relatively lower compared to the rest of the themes, it remained within statistically acceptable limits, which reflects the nature of this dimension as a relatively independent contextual factor, and not a weakness in its constructivist validity. The literature confirms that themes of an organizational nature often show moderate correlation with the overall construct, while retaining high explanatory value within the theoretical model (Schmitt, 1996; Hair et al., 2019).

Therefore, it can be said that the study tool has a good degree of validity at the level of paragraphs, themes, and overall structure, which makes it valid for field application, statistical analysis, and achieving the study objectives.

4. Results

To answer Question 1, the mean values of the sample's responses on a five-point Likert scale were used to determine the level of academic problems faced by foundation year students in some private higher education institutions in the Sultanate of Oman from the students' perspective.

To interpret these values, the five-point scale directly related to the Likert scale scores was used, as follows:

Table (4): Likert scale used in the study

level	very high	High	Medium	low	very low
score	4.20 - 5	3.39- 4.19	2.60 – 3.39	1.80 – 2.59	1 – 1.79

Table (5) below shows the mean values of the level of academic problems faced by foundation year students in some private higher education institutions in the Sultanate of Oman from the students' perspectives.

Table (5): Mean values of level of academic problems

No.	Theme	Mean Value	Level
1	faculty staff	3.23	moderate
2	teaching skills	2.64	moderate
3	course materials	3.35	moderate
4	organizational and administrative	3.58	High

The results indicate that the level of academic problems faced by foundation year students was generally at the moderate level (M = 3.18). This suggests the presence of tangible problems, but not at a very high or severe level. This reflects the nature of the foundation year as a transitional phase in which students encounter multiple academic and organizational challenges that require ongoing institutional support (Yorke & Longden, 2004).

At the sub-aspect level, the results revealed the following:

1.Organizational and administrative problems were at a high level (M = 3.58), indicating that classrooms, teaching methods, and organizational aspects constitute the greatest challenge from the students' perspective. This finding is consistent with the literature indicating that the educational environment and institutional organization are among the most influential factors in student satisfaction and academic adjustment (Tinto, 2015).

2.Problems related to the courses were at a moderate level (M = 3.35), reflecting difficulties inherent in the nature of English, mathematics, and information technology courses, in terms of content, workload, or alignment with students' academic backgrounds. Numerous studies confirm that these courses present a common challenge in foundation year programs (Kift et al., 2010).

3.Problems related to faculty members were at a moderate level (M = 3.23), indicating some difficulties in academic communication or the provision of educational support, without these problems reaching a high level. This reflects the varying experiences of students with faculty members (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005).

4.Problems related to teaching skills scored the lowest average among the dimensions, but remained within the average level (M = 2.64). This indicates that teaching strategies and methods present a relatively lower challenge compared to organizational aspects and the curriculum. However, there remains a need to

develop teaching practices that take into account individual differences and diverse learning styles (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Overall, the analysis according to the five-point scale shows that organizational and administrative aspects represent the most problematic dimension for foundation year students, while the remaining problems are distributed at the average level. This underscores the need for comprehensive institutional interventions that address the educational environment and academic organization, in addition to teaching aspects and the curriculum.

To answer Question 2: a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine the significance of differences in the mean responses of foundation year students regarding academic problems based on the variables of educational institution and gender, as well as to test the correlation effect between them, at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$.

This statistical method is suitable for the nature of the nominal independent variables (institution, gender) and the quantitative dependent variable (total score for academic problems), and it is widely used in comparative educational studies (Field, 2018). The following table presents the results of the statistical analysis.

Table (6): Results of Two-Way ANOVA for Academic Problems According to the Variables of Educational Institution and Gender

Source of variation	(SS)	(DF)	F value	(SIG.)
Educational Institution	7.115	2	8.597	0.000
Gender	0.131	1	0.316	0.574
Interaction (Institution × Gender)	1.161	2	1.403	0.247
Error	196.985	476	—	—
Source of Variation	—	481	—	—

1-Differences according to educational institution variable:

The results of the two-way ANOVA showed statistically significant differences in the mean responses of foundation year students regarding academic problems, attributable to the educational institution variable, at the significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$).

This result indicates that the level of academic problems perceived by students varies according to the educational institution. This reflects the differences in educational and organizational environments, academic policies, and the quality of support provided to foundation year students from one institution to another.

2- Differences according to Gender Variable:

The results showed no statistically significant differences in the mean responses of students regarding academic problems attributable to the gender variable at the significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$).

This result indicates that both males and females face a similar level of academic problems in the foundation year and that the challenges associated with this stage are general in nature and are not as affected by gender as they are by the institutional and educational context.

3-The impact of the correlation between the educational institution and gender:

Results showed no statistically significant interaction effect between the educational institution and gender variables on the average number of academic problems. This means that the educational institution's influence on the level of academic problems does not differ according to the student's gender, and that institutional differences exist independently of gender.

5.Discussion

The results of the second question indicate that the institutional factor is the most influential variable on the level of academic problems faced by foundation year students. This aligns with what educational literature emphasizes: that the quality of academic organization, the clarity of educational policies, and the efficiency of the university environment are crucial elements in the student experience during the first academic year (Tinto, 2015).

Furthermore, the absence of significant differences related to gender is consistent with several studies indicating that academic challenges in the foundation years are often more related to program structure and requirements than to students' demographic characteristics (Yorke & Longden, 2004). This reflects that academic problems at this stage are systemic rather than individual. The absence of an impact from correlation between the institution and gender indicates that academic policies and practices within a single institution affect students in a similar way. This reinforces the need for comprehensive institutional interventions aimed at improving the learning environment for all students without discrimination.

Accordingly, the results revealed the importance of focusing development efforts on improving organizational aspects, curricula, and academic support methods within educational institutions, as this is the most effective approach to reducing academic difficulties among foundation year students.

6. Conclusion

Based on the previous discussion, the study results showed that organizational and administrative problems are among the most prevalent academic challenges faced by foundation year students. These problems varied in effect. Organizational problems averaged 3.85, ranked the high score. Problems related to the curriculum averaged 3.35, indicating a moderate score. Problems related to faculty staff averaged 3.23, also representing a moderate level. While problems related to teaching skills ranked last, with an average of 2.64, the lowest level, also within the moderate level.

The study also revealed statistically significant differences in academic problems attributable to the educational institution variable. However, no statistically significant differences were found based on gender variable. Furthermore, the

analysis showed no statistically significant correlation effect between the educational institution and gender variables.

7. Recommendations::

•Allocate suitable time during the first few weeks of the academic year for an orientation program for students enrolled in the foundation year.
•Conduct training courses for students, such as time management, problem-solving, planning, stress management, and crisis management.

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