

REPORT

Internal quality
assurance in times of
Covid-19

Elena Cirlan and Tia Loukkola

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European University Association asbl

Avenue de l'Yser 24

Rue du Rhône 114

1040 Brussels

Case postale 3174

Belgium

1211 Geneva 3, Switzerland

+32 (0) 2 230 55 44

+41 22 552 02 96

www.eua.eu · info@eua.eu

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Introduction

In response to the Covid-19 crisis, higher education institutions across the world adjusted all their activities to an emergency, remote mode in spring 2020. During the academic year 2020/2021, institutions moved from this emergency mode to exploring a large variety of hybrid¹ or fully online arrangements as the national Covid-19 safety measures shifted depending on the status of the pandemic.

Against this backdrop, the role of quality assurance in ensuring that quality standards are maintained and supporting the university community in their work, while providing assurance to the public of the status of quality in higher education, has become paramount.

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015) establish a set of shared principles for quality assurance. According to the ESG, higher education institutions have the primary responsibility for quality and quality assurance, meaning that internal quality assurance is at the core of quality attainment and the development of a sustainable quality culture. Consequently, this principle is reflected in the design and arrangements of external quality assurance systems, and in the work of quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions, across Europe.

The sudden shift in the mode of operations caused by the pandemic raised questions around the effectiveness, relevance and flexibility of internal quality assurance arrangements. This report aims to provide the reader with an insight into how internal quality assurance continued to operate during the first year of the Covid-19 crisis: for instance, has the situation required changes in internal quality assurance? If so, what were these? Have there been new issues for internal quality assurance to address? If so, how have these been tackled? What lessons learnt from this experience should be considered while moving forward?

This report is based on the outcomes from a focus group that gathered two different cohorts of representatives of European University Association (EUA) member institutions with responsibilities for internal quality assurance on 1 and 2 February 2021, respectively. The same exercises were organised on both days. In total, 39 participants from 20 countries took part in the focus group. Although the sample is limited, the outcomes reflect the discussions and findings of reports from other fora, and it is noteworthy that the conclusions from both sessions concurred. Further, a review of selected materials complements the outcomes of the focus group.

The focus group concentrated on issues related to the education mission, which are the focus of this report. The following sections discuss quality assurance policies and practices; teaching, learning and assessment; and training and support for teaching staff and students from the internal quality assurance perspective. The report concludes with key lessons learnt and reflections on ways forward.

¹ In this report, “hybrid” refers to on-site classroom learning combined with online attendance, whereby some students attend in the classroom at the same time as others attend remotely online.

Institutional reactions and the role of internal quality assurance

This section discusses the key challenges faced by institutions and how they addressed these challenges through internal quality assurance. In line with EUA's previous work, in this report internal quality assurance is understood to refer to all activities related to defining, assuring and enhancing quality.

The focus group discussions echoed the main challenges identified in various reports on the impact of Covid-19 on higher education. These relate primarily to the transition to an online mode of delivery accompanied by the urgent need for capacity building; safeguarding inclusion and equity; student assessment; ensuring academic integrity and data protection; and international mobility (EUA, 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020; Salmi, 2020; QAA, 2020; QOI, 2020). Higher education institutions needed to balance two fundamental values: health and safety on the one hand, and quality of education on the other.

The focus group confirmed that institutional responses varied depending on their size, governance model, discipline and status of online provision prior to the crisis. It also confirmed the important role played by the national context and policies, mainly those related to online provision and assessment. Nevertheless, many similarities could be found in the challenges faced and how they were addressed.

The focus group participants agreed that during 2020, internal quality assurance practices remained fundamentally unchanged, but in many cases their scope and focus was adapted and extended. In the first phase of the pandemic, the focus was on crisis management, largely linked to the transition to online delivery of teaching and university services. Decisions were taken faster than they would be in normal circumstances. This did not allow for decision-making based on evidence gathered through the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle, which forms the basis for many internal quality assurance systems.

During the second phase, attention shifted to quality management and improvement. Thus, during autumn 2020, the focus moved on to checking and planning. This was triggered by a need for information on the experiences gained during the emergency phase to inform more effective planning for the following semester. This experience led some focus group participants to question whether the pace of the typical quality enhancement cycle is too slow to provide timely information to inform decisions in exceptional times.

POLICIES, STRUCTURES AND MONITORING

Policies and regulations

Policies, regulations and guidance were reviewed both at system and institutional level. In a survey carried out among the higher education authorities across the European Higher Education Area in autumn 2020, 16 out of 43 respondents indicated that their higher education regulations had been revised (Gaebel et al., 2021, p. 49). For example, in countries where the regulatory framework did not allow for courses to be delivered online, new laws allowing for such provision and its accreditation were approved. Also, regulations were brought in to allow for more flexible organisation of teaching and examination (e.g. through time-limited ministerial decrees).

In parallel, institutions revised existing internal policies and introduced new ones (see examples in Table 1) to increase clarity and transparency, address the challenges presented by remote operations and ensure equity in and access to education.

Table 1 - Examples of revised or newly introduced institutional policies

Regulatory frameworks for exams
Policies related to student progression
Policies related to academic integrity
Policies related to international mobility
Policies related to internships
Protocols and regulations to support those who continued to work or live on campus
Guidelines for organising laboratory classes and other kinds of learning requiring physical presence (e.g. clinical work)
A code of conduct for remote teaching for both students and teachers
Data protection and privacy regulations for staff and students
Data protection agreements between universities and online tool providers

Decision-making structures

In some cases, changes in national regulations provided institutions with more competences, such as the autonomy to develop and approve themselves the necessary policies for implementation in a faster and more flexible manner. For example, some national authorities gave extraordinary emergency powers to a member of the institutional leadership.

Changes in the distribution of competences in institutional structures or the establishment of new bodies to address the challenges faced in a swifter manner also took place in some cases (see examples in Table 2). Many of these new bodies, however, had a preparatory or advisory role, with the usual decision-making bodies continuing to take decisions according to their usual competences. In many instances, even if the decision-making process was accelerated, it was still based on the participatory principle, including staff and students.

Table 2 - Examples of changes in institutional decision-making structures

Awarding extended powers to different institutional boards and management groups
Establishing a group in charge of approving all changes to study modules and assessment methods that were temporary in nature
Establishing a working group responsible for supporting and monitoring online education
Establishing a “blended learning group” with representation from all departments and relevant support structures
Establishing a Covid-19 task force that had weekly university-wide meetings with faculty-level representatives to collect feedback from staff
Shifting the responsibility for decision-making on selected topics from department/faculty level to institutional level
Giving faculties more autonomy to take decisions, depending on their individual circumstances. In some cases, even individual teaching staff were given more room than usual
Redesigning the programme approval and validation processes and structures so that they were done online

Previously existing committees and decision-making bodies continued their work, albeit online. In general, the experience demonstrated that they were able to operate effectively in this new format. Anecdotes were shared during the focus group to the effect that some of these bodies even saw more active participation and higher attendance rates for online meetings than they had for face-to-face meetings prior to the crisis.

Monitoring and evaluating

As explained above, the focus group participants testified that during the initial crisis phase, decisions were taken quickly, which meant that no monitoring results were used to inform the decision-making formally. Similarly, examples were provided of institutions initially reducing the number of surveys and monitoring activities to a minimum to allow staff and students to focus on their daily responsibilities.

However, in the second phase, the number of surveys conducted at institutional (whether at central, faculty or programme level), regional, national and even international levels increased considerably. In some cases, this has led to survey fatigue and decreasing response rates.

Beyond the surveys, other methods were used for ongoing monitoring (see examples in Table 3). All of these were conducted online, as was the communication of the results. While for many institutions this was not new, for others this required revising their procedures.

Table 3 - Examples of monitoring methods and adjustments made to them

Introducing questions in surveys regarding Covid-19 regulations and their impact on the learning process, as well as on staff and students' wellbeing
Conducting the course evaluation surveys more frequently because of the need for quick corrective actions
Introducing decentralised surveys and providing methodological support in designing these surveys to the units concerned
Taking part in nationwide surveys to avoid developing new surveys and to enable contextualisation of the institution's data
Preparing reports on each course, including statistics on student success and drop-out rates
Monitoring exam and assignment results and final grades, and comparing them with the results obtained during prior academic years to gauge the impact of remote teaching on student performance and learning
Producing a series of reports on the impact of the transition to online learning and teaching
Introducing weekly reporting by teaching staff to the department coordinator about their teaching
Adapting the examination boards, schools-based reviews, course monitoring and committees to the online environment
Deconstructing the site visit model and the timeline of internal quality reviews to respond to the needs of the review team
Organising focus groups and online interviews with teaching staff and students about different aspects and consequences of the crisis
Introducing key performance indicators for academic staff for measuring their digital performance to motivate them to further improve their use of digital resources
Conducting a thematic, cross-institutional quality review of online learning, which resulted in a review of the institution's strategies for digital learning, research and innovation
Conducting peer teaching observation of online teaching with the aim of providing support to teachers in redesigning their teaching methods

Feedback was sought on the usual topics, but also on new ones related to the online delivery of learning, support and training needs, communication channels and their effectiveness, Covid-19 regulations, technology, and staff and student wellbeing.

The results of the monitoring were used to inform decision making, assist with the planning of the next semester, improve learning and teaching activities, and identify areas for staff and student development.

Student participation in quality assurance processes during the crisis varied. Some institutions saw students' representative bodies playing an important role in shaping institutional responses and activities by providing input. For example, it was mentioned by some focus group participants that student representative bodies had taken an active role in gathering and forwarding student feedback, carrying out studies on experiences related to online learning² and having regular meetings with university management to review the status. However, other institutions found it difficult to involve students in formal quality assurance processes such as faculty and programme meetings.

External quality assurance

This report focuses on internal quality assurance. However, it is worth briefly mentioning external quality assurance, because developments in this area have impacted on many institutions. In the first phase of the crisis, the majority of the external quality assurance agencies opted to postpone their procedures in the hope of conducting them in face-to-face mode in the autumn. However, in most cases, these procedures were in the end conducted at least partly online (ENQA, 2020; Kelo, 2021, pp. 250–2).

The focus group participants who took part in such external quality assurance procedures found that the challenges linked to them were largely related to a lack of time to prepare the self-evaluation, organise visits and discuss the outcomes of the visits within the university community at the end of the exercise. However, the online format made it easier to organise the meeting schedules, as people did not need to move physically and thus were able to work around the time limitations.

In terms of the outcomes of online external quality assurance exercises, the general sentiment is that these processes are as robust as those involving an on-site visit.

TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

The ESG outline the expectation that institutions should ensure that their programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students should reflect this approach (ESG, 2015, p. 12). All focus group participants referred to teaching, learning and assessment as areas in which significant changes took place. Most of these related to a partial or full transition to online delivery.

How prepared the institutions, their staff and their students were for the shift to online learning and assessment varied greatly. Institutions that provided online learning and online services before the crisis adjusted better and faster.³

² This report uses the term "online learning" to cover terms such as e-learning, distance education, digital learning and digitally enhanced learning.

³ A survey of higher education institutions carried out by EUA in spring 2020 found that 88% of respondents had a strategy for online learning, usually integrated into a wider strategy for the entire institution. However, only 9% offered fully online degree courses throughout the institution and 27% in some faculties (Gaebel et al., 2021, p. 19).

It is important to note that the emergency remote education of spring 2020 should not be confused with online learning. The former represents a quick and temporary response to a crisis, whereas the latter is planned and grounded in theoretical and practical knowledge specific to the field (Bozkurt et al., 2020, p. 2). However, as the pandemic persisted, some institutions' emergency remote education started to shift towards online learning. This shift emerged from the experience institutions gained with online pedagogies and assessment methods, their acquisition of various digital tools and learning to use them more efficiently, and their investment in capacity building for staff and students.

When institutions abruptly moved online, their focus was primarily on acquiring the tools required for online learning, including purchasing licences, ensuring access to technology and equipment, expanding online libraries and making practical arrangements, such as adapting schedules. The key concerns for institutions were choosing the most appropriate tools, quickly updating the relevant technological infrastructure, and ensuring access to learning, teaching and relevant materials by setting up support mechanisms for staff and students. Generally, no changes to curricula were made and the intended learning outcomes remained the same, even if the individual course syllabuses were modified.

In the second phase, the focus moved towards improving didactics and pedagogy for online learning and streamlining the tools used, as feedback from students revealed that the use of differing tools from one course to another was causing confusion and frustration. Institutions started working on long-term planning, informed by experience gained. The feedback collected from staff and students on various aspects of online learning led to an increased exploration of teaching methods such as hybrid, multidisciplinary, problem-based, competency-based and project-based learning and teaching, simulations and case studies. The benefits of asynchronous, recorded lectures were discovered. Student feedback showed that in some cases they preferred these, because recorded lectures allow flexibility in timing, as well as the ability to pause or repeat sections if something is unclear. However, students indicated missing face-to-face interactive sessions.

Institutions' efforts were supported in some cases by the national authorities, which stepped up their support for higher education institutions in delivering online learning and teaching in 28 higher education systems (Gaebel et al., 2021, p. 49). For example, they issued recommendations on introducing blended learning and developed projects promoting the integration of digital tools into pedagogical approaches.

A particular concern was posed by teaching in disciplines that rely on laboratory-based, practical or clinical skills provision or internships. In such study programmes, curricula and schedules were adjusted so that practical modules could be arranged on site in a physically distanced manner, postponed or rearranged so that part of the preparation could be done online, allowing for the time spent on site to be used more efficiently.

In addition to reorganising the teaching, institutions also reviewed their approaches to the assessment of learning⁴ due to two factors.

First, in many countries the status of the pandemic during the 2020 exam period did not allow for exams to be organised on site. This posed a challenge, even for those institutions that were offering online learning before the crisis, because assessments were normally conducted on site. Therefore, in many cases assessment policies and methods had to be revised, and a great deal of experimentation took place. For example, various combinations of assessment methods, such as "open book" exams, case studies, portfolios, written essays, authentic assignments, peer assessment and work-based assessment, were applied.

⁴ The approaches of Irish public higher education institutions to revising assessments may serve as an illustration of the changes in this field. These are described in the QQI report on the impact of Covid-19 modifications to teaching, learning and assessment (2020, pp. 95-116).

Further, the use of digital assessment increased exponentially. This meant that institutions that normally conducted assessments on site had to find new ways to ensure data protection and academic integrity. With this in mind, institutions revised, developed and disseminated policies, procedures and tutorials regarding the delivery of digital assessment. They introduced systems to oversee exams conducted online and guided students in avoiding academic misconduct. However, in many cases institutions refrained from using proctoring software as a result of the distress and opposition the use of such software generated among students, who questioned what data would be collected, when and where it would be collected and how it would be stored.

Second, concerns arose about how the move to online delivery, the changes in the assessment methods and the students' personal situations would impact on the students' learning and success. To minimise the risk of low assessment performance, some institutions allowed students to postpone their exams or to take them several times.

The data on the impact of the changes made to the provision of student learning is inconclusive. The institutions taking part in the focus group came to varied conclusions when comparing 2020's exam results with those of previous years, whereby some saw results dropping slightly, whereas others observed no changes or slightly better results. Moreover, due to the changes in assessment methods the results cannot in all cases be considered comparable. The focus group participants also wondered whether all assessment methods used were effective, fair and adequate given the intended learning outcomes. Nevertheless, the pandemic had a positive effect on the diversification of assessment, as it presented an opportunity for institutions to change their mindsets and reflect on how they approached assessment, including reconsidering the number of exams set.⁵

In most cases, the areas in which changes were implemented in assessment were within the remit of institutional autonomy, but in a few cases national regulations were also revised. Mainly, these regarded final exams and final thesis defences.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT TO TEACHING STAFF AND STUDENTS

Ensuring that teaching staff are competent and equipped with the required professional knowledge and skills and providing adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support, are at the core of internal quality assurance (ESG, 2015, pp. 13-14). However, the disruption of the usual modus operandi caused by the pandemic meant that it was a matter of urgency to train and support staff and students.

Prior to the Covid-19 crisis most institutions had structures in place for staff development, including in the field of online provision. According to an EUA survey, each of the following were in place in at least three-quarters of institutions: a unit supporting teachers on all technical issues, digital skills training opportunities, online repositories for educational material, a unit supporting teachers on digitally enhanced learning and teaching, and online platforms for exchange and collaboration (Gaebel et al., 2021, p. 34).

The focus group participants confirmed that many of these had been in place in their institutions, but the challenge was twofold. First, demand for and participation in support measures grew exponentially. Second, staff and students' needs were very diverse and therefore new training materials had to be developed quickly.

⁵ The EUA Learning & Teaching Thematic Peer Group on assessment, whose final report was published in March 2020, called for institutional approaches to assessment to be aligned with student-centred learning. The report provides a questionnaire for institutional self-reflection (Evans and Bunescu, 2020).

Formal training, guidance and support was offered either at central, faculty or department level. These formal measures needed to cover not only the technical and pedagogical aspects of online learning, but also the assessment methods, which, as discussed above, changed in many cases. For this, qualified technical staff, who could give training and advice on how to use various tools, how to plan and design online lectures and collaborative activities for students, and how to foster more interaction, were in high demand.

Besides the formal structures, various informal support and training opportunities (see Table 4) were found to be very effective as the teaching staff were quick to find support within or outside their institution. All in all, the focus group participants observed increased cooperation at all levels, including the emergence of networks dealing with online pedagogy and the use of technology.

Table 4 - Examples of support measures for teaching staff

Establishing information sources on hybrid and online learning (e.g. websites) where training materials and a repository of good practices were gathered
Establishing institutional learning and teaching communities or groups comprised of teaching, management and support services staff with advanced digital skills to provide support to their colleagues. In some cases, these groups were tasked with solving specific issues occurring during classes or supervising the design of a course
Organising monthly webinars dedicated to the challenges and opportunities in learning and teaching
Organising the “didactic Fridays” initiative for teaching staff
Offering online drop-in sessions with pedagogical experts present for staff to support them to make changes to modules, pedagogy and learning technology
Offering personalised online training to teaching staff
Providing online guidance, training and tutorials regarding online teaching practices, student engagement techniques and assessment, including information on how to decide on and provide various types of assessment and how to use different assessment tools
Employing student moderators to support teaching staff during online lectures
Acquiring new software and hardware, accompanied by training and tutorials on their functions to optimise staff members’ ability to use them
Offering technical support and setting up pop-up studios for teaching staff to train them on making recorded lectures

There was a strong consensus among the focus group participants that the first year of pandemic led to an increased workload for staff. Institutions addressed this by offering psychological support, for which the demand had increased. The informal peer support and peer learning discussed above were also seen as ways of trying to release the pressure on individual staff members.

In parallel with staff support, institutions worked actively to support students. Here, again, the challenge was twofold: at the same time as the demand for student support measures increased, the nature of the support also changed due to the move to online delivery of both teaching and support services.

In the survey carried out at the beginning of the pandemic, 73% of the higher education institutions that responded replied that students had positive attitudes towards online learning and teaching (Gaebel et al., 2021, p. 43). However, the move to fully online delivery showed gaps in students’ digital skills. To address these gaps, institutions offered guidance, organised training and digital support on the use of online tools, as well as on how to take online exams.

However, as discussed in the focus group and confirmed by a survey among students (Napier, 2021, p. 277), the greatest challenges the students encountered were not caused by the transition to online learning per se, but rather by the context around that. Among these were issues such as not having access to Wi-Fi, lack of digital equipment or an adequate place to study, financial difficulties (caused by job loss), lack of social interaction with peers, psychological issues, and health and family issues.

Hence, for institutions the key questions were how to support students at risk and minimise the number of students dropping out; how to support students encountering traumatic and psychological issues caused by loneliness, poverty and the fear of losing a full academic year; and how to address digital poverty among students. To tackle these and other challenges, institutions put in place various support mechanisms (see Table 5).

Table 5 - Examples of student support measures

Providing students in need with IT equipment
Providing students with equipped study places and access to library facilities when possible
Adapting student welfare, counselling and support services to a remote setting and addressing, through these, specific problems related to the pandemic
Offering guidance to students who were abroad in a mobility period and to international students hosted by the institution
Providing additional scholarships and allowances for students facing financial challenges due to the pandemic
Allowing students in need to stay in the dormitories during lockdown and allowing them to postpone rent payment
Training student tutors to provide either practical or psychological support to other students and organise self-support groups

The focus group participants indicated that it was particularly challenging for first-year students to integrate into the institutional environment and adapt to online learning. To tackle this, many institutions established detailed online instructions for first-year students to help them navigate the institutional environment, learn online and use digital tools.

The focus group discussion highlighted the paramount role of communication between institutional management, staff and students. A myriad of communication channels was created by institutions (e.g. websites and newsletters) and used to give prompt information about any changes and to compensate for the lack of face-to-face communication. In many cases, student representative bodies were instrumental in establishing informal communication channels for students. However, many focus group participants found that communication remained challenging, in particular because of the continuous changes in the provision conditions.

Conclusions and looking forward

The first year of the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the paramount role played by institutional daily practices in ensuring the quality of education. For internal quality assurance, the key challenge was to be flexible enough to adapt to the changing and unpredictable context of the crisis and to react quickly while maintaining the coherence and consistency of quality assurance actions.

An overwhelming majority of the focus group participants concluded that their respective institutions had succeeded in maintaining the quality of their activities in most areas during the crisis. In all cases, ensuring the quality of awarded degrees and the continuous progress of students remained of high priority. In this context, various areas of concern for internal quality assurance, such as ensuring inclusion and equity, addressing digital poverty, safeguarding the health and mental wellbeing of staff and students alike, and ensuring data protection and academic integrity in the online environment, gained prominence.

Institutions have shown remarkable resilience and capacity for acting swiftly. The key success factors arising include the following:

- institutional autonomy, allowing institutions to make decisions and act promptly, accompanied by adequate institutional strategy, leadership and capacity to manage change;
- flexibility of institutional decision-making to facilitate local adaptations, for example at faculty and programme level;
- quality culture, based on ownership of and commitment to quality shared by all members of an institutional community;
- willingness of staff to innovate and experiment to find solutions and adapt;
- collaboration and sharing of experiences across the institution and between institutions to seek solutions to the challenges faced;
- efficient communication between institutional management, staff and students.

The pandemic has prompted a major boost to the digitalisation of higher education institutions. It has revealed the potential and benefits, as well as the shortcomings, of online learning. There is a great desire to return to face-to-face teaching. However, at the same time a significant consensus prevails that institutions should learn the lessons from this experience and retain the good practices established. A survey carried out in the early days of the pandemic showed that 95% of the institutions that responded considered digitalisation to be one of their strategic priorities in developing teaching and learning in the next five years (Gaebel et al., 2021, p. 45). Similarly, EUA's Vision for Universities 2030 foresees a hybrid campus becoming a reality (EUA, 2021).

Discussions on long-term perspectives need to take place now to prepare for the future. To take full advantage of the potential of digitalisation, fundamental changes will be required. Quality assurance should contribute to reflections on the future development of teaching and learning by providing evidence on the most efficient approaches. In this context the following questions need attention: How can online learning be used effectively to enhance quality of learning? How can digitalisation support the specific needs of a diverse student body? What kind of expertise is needed to offer online learning? Will the roles of academic and support staff need to be reconsidered? What kind of capacity building will staff and students need?

Despite the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, the main principles of internal quality assurance as stated in the ESC persevered, but in many cases their scope was adapted and extended. The quality assurance of online learning needs to consider issues such as digitalisation policy and strategy, monitoring instruments, appropriateness of digital tools, online course development and structure, curricula design, digital assessment methods, data protection, privacy regulations and academic integrity, staff and student support, staff development, and building online academic communities and other online communication channels (Huertas et al., 2018). As discussed in previous sections, these have been some of the main areas in which institutions have implemented changes, and they will need further attention in the future.

The typical internal quality assurance enhancement cycle proved to be slow to react in times of crisis. Therefore, further reflection on how processes could be revised to allow for a swifter feedback loop and more timely reactions, is needed. A closer investigation of how the digitalisation of quality assurance processes could contribute to faster monitoring, more efficient communication on the results and consultation with the institutional community could offer some ways forward.

In conclusion, only by addressing the above issues can internal quality assurance stay relevant and demonstrate its value-added in promoting the continued innovation of teaching and learning in higher education.

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