

Supporting Open Education Policymaking by Higher Education Institutions in The Netherlands: Lessons Learned

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Abstract

A survey conducted in 2012 among publicly financed higher education institutions in the Netherlands revealed a growing awareness of the strategic relevance of Open Educational Resources (OER) and Open Education. However, hardly any policy or strategy related to OER and Open Education had been formulated by any of the higher education institutions involved. At the same time, most of the institutions expressed a need for a strategic approach of OER and Open Education. To meet this need, SURF, the collaborative organisation for ICT in Dutch higher education and research, and more particularly its Special Interest Group on OER, gave ten Dutch higher education institutions the opportunity to assist in developing a strategic approach of OER and Open Education, organising strategy workshops.

Every workshop was tailored to the specific needs and problems of the institution concerned. To be able to do so, an approach had been formulated which started with a semi-structured interview. The objective of this interview was to find out why the institution had decided to participate in the workshop and what it wanted to achieve, and to identify the driving forces within the institutions for conducting the workshop. The next step was to design the workshop. This was done in close cooperation with the institution concerned. The third part of the process was conducting the actual workshop. In the last phase, findings and conclusions were formulated.

Almost all participating Dutch higher education institutions were inclined to formulate a strategic view on OER and Open Education. The workshops have provided detailed insights into the perceptions and expectations of Dutch higher education institutions involved with regard to OER, MOOCs and Open Education. One such insight is that although most participants are aware of the existence of OER, MOOCs and other forms of Open Education and feel some sense of urgency, many of them do not have any idea how to apply these concepts in their own institutions, let alone know where to start. Another insight is that many of the people who attended the workshops did so because they felt that their institution should develop MOOCs. In most cases it turned out that by discussing the pros and cons of MOOCs as well as the (in)appropriateness of other forms of Open Education for their institutions, the participants developed a broader view of Open Education.

In this article the process and approach followed will be presented, as well as lessons learned and conclusions drawn. We conclude that the strategic workshops can be considered a success, thanks to the effectiveness of a tailor-made programme embedded within a fixed process framework. The positive attitude and willingness to share knowledge on the part of the participants contributed greatly to the results. One prerequisite for success is that various sections from the institution participate in the workshop, and that a range of perspectives be presented.

The importance of a neutral platform as a basis for an open discussion must not be underestimated.

Keywords

Policy on Open Education, OER, MOOC, Netherlands

Introduction

Higher education in the Netherlands is known for its high quality and its international study environment. With more than 1800 international study programmes and courses, the Netherlands has the largest offering of English-taught programmes in continental Europe. Dutch higher education has a binary system, which means that students can choose between two types of education: (1) research-oriented education offered by research universities, and (2) higher professional education, offered by universities of applied sciences. At a research university students tend to focus on research-oriented work, which can be in either an academic or a professional setting. At a university of applied sciences students can choose a professional programme in the applied arts and sciences, designed to prepare them for a specific career. In 2002, the Netherlands introduced the Bachelor's-Master's degree structure. Both research universities and universities of applied sciences can award a Bachelor's or a Master's degree. After completion of a Master's programme, graduates can start a PhD degree programme (third cycle).

In February 2013, SURF (the organisation for ICT collaboration in higher education and research in the Netherlands; <http://www.surf.nl/en>) announced that it planned to organise ten strategic workshops to support higher education institutions in developing their vision and policy on open and online education (Schuwer et al, 2013). Within one month, ten higher education institutions had registered. Their interest was not entirely unexpected – a study commissioned in the previous year by SURF and Wikiwijs on the state of affairs regarding Open Educational Resources (OER) in Dutch higher education revealed that 42 per cent of institutions were in the process of developing an OER vision or policy (SURF, 2012). In the study, the institutions stated that they would appreciate help in forming their policies.

Over a quarter of higher education institutions that took part in the aforementioned study possess OER collections. When the study was conducted, more and more institutions were making their learning materials publicly available for use and re-use, led by the Open University and Delft University of Technology. Medical research and 'green research' were also large contributors in this area. Developers of independent Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in 2013 included Leiden University, Delft University of Technology, the University of Amsterdam and the Open University.

The SURF Open Education Special Interest Group (SIG) (<https://www.surfspace.nl/sig/5-open-education/>) and SURF itself decided to create tailor-made strategic workshops to meet the needs of the institutions. Participants were selected on a 'first-come-first-served' basis. Over the course of 2013, workshops were held at three universities (Erasmus University Rotterdam, VU University Amsterdam and Tilburg University), two university medical centers (Radboud UMC and the Academic Medical Centre) and four universities of applied sciences (Avans, Fontys,

Windesheim and Saxion). A fifth participating university of applied sciences decided that the initial assessment interview was enough for it to make a start on its own.

This article describes how the workshops were created, as well as the new insights that came out of them. It gives an overview of the opportunities, challenges, strategic issues and questions that arose during the workshops. We will discuss our lessons learned, as well as the follow-ups and opportunities that the Dutch approach may offer to others.

Structure of the strategic workshops

By creating the workshops, SURF and the Open Education SIG aimed to assist participating higher education institutions in developing their vision or policy regarding open and online education (Schuwer et al, 2013). A second goal of the workshops focused on the sharing of knowledge and expertise.

The strategic workshops were held at the various institutions, with a minimum of 10 and maximum of 45 participants. All workshops were coordinated and led by the same moderator, who was accompanied by a pool of moderators and speakers, mostly experts from the Open Education SIG.

By offering tailor-made workshops, SURF and the Open Education SIG attempted to tailor the content as closely as possible to the knowledge and needs present within the institution, in order to maximise the results achieved during a single morning/afternoon session. Institutions could choose between an informative workshop, one that assists with the formation of an opinion on open and online education, or a workshop aimed at the development of a concrete strategy. In practice, all workshops given turned out to be an amalgam of the first two types.

In order to foster the individual character of each workshop, the coordinator and one or more moderators held an assessment interview with each institution beforehand. During these interviews, the context of the strategic workshop was discussed through questions such as: What is the reason for wanting the workshop? What does the institution aim to achieve with the workshop? What is the participants' current level of knowledge and experience when it comes to open and online education? What results do they have in mind?

The overall outline of a strategic workshop has been as follows:

1. Welcome by a member of the Executive Board, a Dean or director of education.
2. Introduction by the coordinator.
3. Plenary presentation (sometimes two or three) by speakers/guest speakers. Topic: what are Open Educational Resources, what is Open Education, and how can these influence higher education?
4. Interactive brainstorming session in groups on a specific question. For example: What is the potential impact of open and online education on the institution itself? Or: What opportunities or possibilities can you envisage for the institution?
5. Break
6. Second brainstorming session on concrete lines of action. Is there any room for experiments? What projects can be started?
7. Conclusion with feedback on results, and agreements regarding follow-up.

Open Educational Resources, Open Courseware, MOOCs and Open Education

All strategic workshops start by clearly defining the subject at hand. The following definitions and descriptions have been applied::

Openness

For years, open universities and institutions for distance education have been responding to the need for distance education and lifelong learning. The digital revolution has added to this open education an innovative, burgeoning world of OER, OpenCourseWare and Massive Open Online Courses. 'Traditional' Open Education is characterised by accessibility, i.e. a lack of admission requirements. Participants complete the course (or a full curriculum) at their own pace. Often there are no requirements for physical attendance or to start by a fixed date. Digital openness adds two special aspects to this: many online learning materials are available for free, and may be freely edited through the use of open licensing. This means that anybody with Internet access can conduct informal private study, as well as edit and distribute learning materials.

Open Educational Resources

Open Educational Resources (OER) are learning materials that are freely available for use and re-use online. The copying, editing and distribution of these materials is permitted (subject to certain conditions) through the use of an open licence, such as Creative Commons.

OpenCourseWare

OpenCourseWare (OCW) refers to a complete course using OER that have been released for use or re-use by a higher education institution.

Massive Open Online Courses

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are free online courses available to a very large number of simultaneous participants. Participants sign up, complete tests, are often supported by teachers, and receive a certificate of completion (sometimes subject to a fee).

Open Education

OER and MOOCs do not qualify as Open Education in themselves – additional components are required first. Besides OER, (Mulder & Janssen, 2013) and (Mulder & Janssen, 2014) have identified four additional components, which together form the Five Components of Open Education (5COE) model. On the supply side of education, they identify:

1. (Open) Educational Resources (OER), or teaching materials;
2. (Open) Learning Services (OLS); and
3. (Open) Teaching Efforts (OTE).

On the demand side, they identify two components:

1. Open to Learners' Needs (OLN); and
2. Open to Employability & Capabilities development (OEC), or expectations from the social environment.

Openness is not a doctrine, but a choice. With the 5COE model in hand, an institution can determine its own desired level of openness. For example, institutions may decide to open up their education in order to cater for the diversity in attributes, circumstances and needs of its target groups.

What did the strategic workshops achieve?

Of the nine participating institutions in 2013, eight decided on a programme focusing on opinion-forming. The participants identified threats and opportunities presented by open and online education at their own institutions, after which they drew up an initial list of projects to get started with. A brief summary is given below of the insights that came out of the strategic workshops.

Opportunities offered by online education, as identified during the workshops

Participants in the strategic workshops see OER and Open Education as instruments that can be used to **improve the quality** of both teaching materials and education in general. Open and online education can contribute to **innovation** in education. A term often used is that of the flipped classroom, or making teaching materials available online beforehand (such as lectures), freeing up more room during class time for in-depth exploration, group assignments and personal guidance.

According to workshop participants, open and online education also promotes **flexibility** within programmes. If there are no lectures/tutorials, students can use OER to explore the topic independently. It is also an instrument capable of broadening the scope of education, e.g. by directing students to interesting additional materials available online.

In economic terms, participants expect that after an initial investment, Open Education may help to **reduce costs**. The internal and external sharing of teaching materials saves money.

Universities of applied sciences in particular propose that it is better to make use of knowledge within the organisation, among students and in the region by means of open and online education.

Open and online education also offers strategic benefits. MOOCs can help to boost the regional, national and international visibility of higher education institutions, a promotional opportunity often focused on by research universities in particular.

Threats posed by online education, as identified during the workshops

The fact of open and online education as a key influencing factor is irrevocable, and it is up to institutions to formulate a response. Participants concluded that the **lack of an institution's own vision** on this development can produce undesirable consequences. Open and online education is not an independent phenomenon in and of itself that can be responded to with ad hoc decisions. Institutions that fail to include it as part of their educational strategy risk being outpaced by developments.

Increased visibility also increases **vulnerability**. Many institutions indicate that staff are sometimes not ready to expose themselves to the outside world. Lecturers value the authoritative status they possess within the walls of the classroom. The cultural shift required to become (and aspire to be) more visible to the outside world was raised as an important issue in nearly all workshops. Some internal resistance is also evident in the occasional remark that open and online education is not part of the institution's job.

Universities of applied sciences fear losing their **regional identity** if the trends surrounding OER and MOOCs continue. If new competitors enter their territory, they run the risk of losing their unique position in the region.

Some workshop participants mentioned potential problems with **accreditation**. Is it really possible to allocate course credits for taking MOOCs? How are Open Education contact hours calculated, and how to measure aspects such as quality?

Reservations with respect to the **financial aspects** were also expressed, not infrequently, during the workshops. How can the initial investment actually pay for itself? What is the revenue model? Institutions wonder whether they can actually carve out a niche for themselves among the enormous quantity of available MOOCs.

Open Education: gaining experience

Practically all participants agreed that we learn most by doing. This can be achieved either by starting up small projects or experiments, or by encouraging lecturers to take MOOCs and use OER themselves. This is the fastest way to discover what it is, how it works and how useful it is. Hybrid teaching methods, such as the flipped classroom, lend themselves well to experimentation with, and dialogue about, open and online education.

Lecturers can also take on a new role as content curators. Students want to be certain that OER are relevant, and that what they are learning is what they later need to reproduce. It is important to encourage lecturers to voice their approval of the learning materials.

The sharing of learning materials turns out to be far from standard practice within institutions, which may be a good point to start working with Open Education. There is a trend among universities of applied sciences to set up 'bodies of knowledge' for the first two years of study, to which OER would form a fitting addition. Remedial courses, transition programmes and some standard subjects also lend themselves to this purpose. All higher education institutions should aim to achieve further alignment with the professional field on the development, use and re-use of OER.

Both university medical centres and universities of applied sciences share the desire to jointly improve the quality of research skills through open and online education.

Management bodies are urgently advised to facilitate such experiments not only financially, but also in terms of organisation, technology and legal support.

Open Education: developing vision and policy

Based on the insights gained during the workshops, below we offer a number of recommendations to higher education institutions wishing to develop a vision or policy on open and online education. A conclusion often drawn during the strategic workshops is that higher education institutions must take both a **bottom-up** and a **top-down** approach to open and online education. Experiments both in and outside the classroom are useful in order to gain experience and explore the possibilities offered by OER. However, experiments alone are insufficient if there is no context being created in which to implement and record the results. To create a vision and policy on Open Education, institutions must ask themselves a number of questions. For example: Why and to what extent do we wish to participate? What are the priorities? How is open and online education related to other topics on our educational agenda? How will Open Education help to strengthen our 'core business'? What resources do we need? And so on (see box 1)

The workshops have shown that the **professionalisation** of lecturers in the field of open and online education is crucial. Lecturers must be aware of the added value of open and online education, have a sound knowledge of what it entails and know how to put it into practice. This professionalisation process does not happen automatically, but needs to be instigated by the institution.

Box 1: 'Open' as an ice-breaker

'The strategic workshop was a good point of departure for getting the subject of open and online education onto the agenda at Erasmus University Rotterdam', says Gerard Baars, director of the EUR Risbo research institute. 'In recent years our focus has been mainly on improving study success. The workshop had nearly forty participants, including representatives from all EUR faculties and support services, who learned a lot about the current developments in the field of open online education.'

Another aim of the workshop, in addition to providing information, was to generate a list of ideas on open and online education among stakeholders at EUR and to generate discussion. The ideas among the various target groups turned out to correspond in many respects.

'EUR needs to do something with open and online education. There are opportunities available such as attracting new target groups, especially international students and course participants for postgraduate programmes', summarises Baars.

The workshop was one of the building blocks that led to a draft policy document describing the multi-year plan for EUR. Although the document still needs to be evaluated by various bodies, the plan is expected to go ahead. EUR is taking an approach that includes more than just open online education, however. Over the next two years, the entire university will be experimenting with the opportunities offered by online learning, in both undergraduate and post-experience programmes.

1. The university wishes to use online education to ease students' transition into academic education at the pre-programme stage. This is possible, for example, using an online transition module designed to 'brush up' on any skills or knowledge that may be lacking.
2. A second objective concerns improvements to *campus-based* education. By running part of a subject online, or including effective third-party open and online teaching materials and ensuring that the contact hours contain high-quality content, *flipping the classroom* can lead to improvements in the quality of on-campus education.
3. Pilot projects will be carried out, involving open online education (e.g. MOOCs) and preferably interdisciplinary collaboration with strategic partners, e.g. as part of the Leiden-Delft-Erasmus (LDE) alliance. All pilot projects will be closely scrutinised in terms of, for example, quality and scalability before being given the green light.

An evaluation of the EUR online learning programme will be carried out in two years' time, after which more precise choices may be made for the the 2016-2018 period.

Baars: 'The focus of the strategic workshop was very much on the "open" aspect. This is not our only objective, but it did serve as a good ice-breaker within EUR, and certainly got the discussion going.'

Innovation

For many higher education institutions, MOOCs form the catalyst that spark the discussion on open and online education. It is no surprise, therefore, that they have been a main focus during the strategic workshops. Many academic institutions consider developing a MOOC prior to the strategic workshops, in order to attract outstanding international students, PhD candidates and staff. However, because the workshops present a much broader picture of the possibilities offered by open and online education (e.g. for their own teaching activities), their views on

MOOCs change and MOOCs become only one of the ways of opening up education. The general conclusion from the workshops is that if an institution wishes to create its own MOOC, it must know exactly why. A proven method when offering MOOCs or other forms of open and online education is to begin with the 'jewels' in the institution's crown and to start with the people and subjects that the institution wishes to put on display.

Doing this, it must be stressed that innovation through open and online education costs both time and money. Institutions wanting to make a serious start will need to free up funds and staff. A **cultural shift** is also necessary, and is usually the greatest challenge in any organisational change. The shift relates not only to the professionalisation of teaching staff, but also to striking a balance between open, online and campus-based education so that these three components support and benefit one another.

Open and online education provides opportunities for collaboration between institutions, e.g. in matters involving remedial courses (courses that students need to pass in order to take another course) and transitional programmes. Universities of applied sciences and the university medical centers note that students' research skills often leave much to be desired. This represents an opportunity for the joint development of high-quality OER. During the workshops, participants became aware that going in search of 'low-hanging fruit' together offers many benefits. The Radboud UMC institute for nursing and paramedics, for example, decided to make the results of an existing, successful project available to all other nursing programmes as an Open Educational Resource (see box 2).

Box 2: Low-hanging fruit

The strategic workshop at Radboud UMC was attended not only by members from the medical degree programme, but also from the institution for nursing and paramedics, in order to generate a joint strategy on Open Education. Senior policy officer Nicolai van der Woert from the Educational Innovation Office at the Radboud Health Care Academy (*Zorgacademie*) described the situation as a 'unique event' in the history of the Radboud UMC. Those present included students, lecturers, policy officers and directors of education. 'The discussion surrounding open and online education is often riddled with misconceptions', says Van der Woert. 'That is why the strategic workshop is so useful. It's also nice that it is organised by an external party, which helps to promote an objective discussion.'

The differences in the approach to open and online education between the two institutions were clear. 'This year saw the beginning of a curriculum review for the medical degree programme', Van der Woert explains. 'All decisions related to open and online education and OER need to be in line with the revisions.' No new policy on open and online education was therefore being developed for doctors currently in training. The nursing and paramedics institute did decide to create policy. However, both target groups decided to go for the 'low-hanging fruit' first. As a result of the workshop, the use of OER in the medical degree programme has been incorporated into the curriculum review. It has been included in documents stating the guiding principles, and projects will be initiated in which OER will be used by lecturers.

The nursing and paramedics institute decided to work in the opposite direction, and chose to share a successful project on restricted and high-risk procedures with the rest of the Netherlands in the form of an OER. In addition to an Open Educational Resource, it has also become an Open Policy Resource, including guidelines for implementation. The institute has also set out to create an interactive iBook for the Basic Life Support course. Key lessons for students resulting from operating room simulations have also been collated, forming the basis for a second iBook including OER.

Van der Woert believes that a follow-up to the workshop is an absolute must. 'After the workshop, the trick now is learning how to keep the fire burning,' he says. 'Open Education places great demands on institutions. For example, we have noticed that we cannot do without adequate support for teaching staff. The issue of the new role of libraries and publishers has also been raised for discussion.'

At the Netherlands Association for Medical Education (NVMO) congress, the Radboud UMC ran a round-table discussion on the role of libraries and publishers in open and online education. Van der Woert: 'In contrast to reports about educational publishers in other sectors, in our experience medical publishers are only too happy to enter into a dialogue about their changing role. Medical libraries, too, understand how indispensable their part is in the support process.'

Well-considered choices

Making education open (or more open) is an evolving trend: it is not entirely clear where it will take us. It is clear, however, that it is a process of exploration with great potential that is already well beyond the small-scale experimental stage. The participating institutions are aware of this fact – a vision on open and online education is now indispensable. The choice *not* to participate must also be well-considered, and based on an evaluation of the potential consequences.

Institutions that come to the strategic workshops with the idea of making an international name for themselves via a MOOC soon expand their horizons to include open and online education in its broader sense. They conclude that other forms of open and online education may be just as important to their own teaching activities as MOOCs.

Participants also gradually discover that making education open does not mean creating everything yourself, but that it can also include the re-use of OER from elsewhere for the institution's own purposes.

Facilitating experiments

Educational institutions starting out with open and online education would do well to reserve a large enough budget and to deploy enthusiastic staff. They should also expect to face many obstacles, and they need funding: Open Education is not just an ancillary add-on. One question that institutions should ask themselves is whether the initial experiments are scalable.

Exceptions, after all, are difficult to generalise. To assist lecturers in their professionalisation process, institutions must organise support for the pedagogical, legal and technological issues associated with searching for and publishing OER.

Lessons Learned

The structure chosen for the strategic workshops has proved an effective one. An extended assessment interview as the basis for a tailor-made programme embedded within a fixed process framework has shown to be efficient. The importance of a thorough assessment interview is highlighted by the fact that the institutions all have different motives when registering for the workshops. It is essential to gain a clear idea of why an institution wishes to participate, as well as of who placed the issue on the institution's agenda. For example, is the motivation for developing a vision or policy on open and online education coming from above, from an ICT advisory body, a faculty, or a group of individuals?

A key factor to the success of the workshop is to ensure that various sections of the institution are represented. Additional value is created when the Executive Board, middle management, policy staff, support services staff, lecturers and students are all present, as was the case with Fontys (see box 3). Attendance by board members is a sign that the institution genuinely values Open Education. The various stakeholders also approach the subject with a range of perspectives that must be explicitly stated and analysed during the workshop. One common observation is that the various standpoints result in 'eye-openers' among the participants.

Box 3: Share and share alike

'Fontys has a great deal of expertise when it comes to open and online education. Small-scale experiments were also being carried out, however we still did not have any Fontys-wide policy', explains Economics Information Manager Desirée van den Bergh from Fontys Universities of Applied Sciences. The aim of the Fontys strategic workshop was to investigate whether there is an institution-wide need for open and online education.

Fontys consists of thirty institutions that prepare students for a variety of careers. All these institutions work at their own pace on educational innovation, and with their own understanding of this field. Van den Bergh believes that the strength of the workshop lies in the diversity of the groups present: lecturers, directors, policymakers, information management staff, but also staff from support services such as Education and Research, IT and Marketing & Communication.

'What we all had in common at the end of the workshop was the conviction that Open Education is developing fast, and that Fontys needs to get involved', she says. 'The strategic workshop also revealed that we find it important to share knowledge throughout Fontys on experiments that are currently underway, and to create an overview of what types of support are needed. Participants had different ideas on the added value for education. Are we going to use Open Education as a supplement to existing education, for remedial courses, for example? Or will entire curricula be offered this way in the future?'

As a result of the strategic workshop, the Education and Research Committee at Fontys was asked to devote attention to Open Education. Fontys also organised a follow-up meeting involving knowledge exchange on the experiments currently underway. During this meeting, others were asked whether they also wanted to participate in the experiments, and were invited to indicate what types of support were required. The ideas generated at the meeting will be presented to the committee in late March.

Both the workshop and the follow-up meeting demonstrated the importance of fostering a culture of 'share and share alike'. One Fontys institution, for example, is considering developing a MOOC or OER in the field of dance as part of a European project. The initiators received feedback on their questions from the expert present (Willem van Valkenburg from Delft University of Technology) as well as from colleagues.

Van den Bergh: 'The strategic workshop is extremely worthwhile for educational organisations wanting to get involved in the developments in Open Education. The workshop was run very professionally, which helped greatly to put the subject in the right context. We are looking forward to the next series of SURF activities on open and online education, and would be happy to contribute to their development.'

Neutral organiser

The formula for the strategic workshops demands a high level of neutrality from the organising party, as the institutions are giving each other a glimpse into the heart of their strategy.

Entrusting the organisation of the event to an umbrella organisation (SURF, in the case of the Netherlands) ensures that neutrality is guaranteed. The agenda and objectives of the workshop must also be clear and self-evident at the institutional level. Compulsory attendance or scheduling within some other event (such as a conference) does not result in the same degree of pro-activeness that characterises most workshops.

Positive

One noteworthy aspect of the strategic workshops is the positive attitude of all attendees. The institutions are motivated to take part from a need to do 'something' with open and online education. The experts attend in the knowledge that they have a valuable contribution to share. The core members of the Open Education SIG voluntarily shoulder the task of moderating the workshops in turn. All attendees share the conviction that the session is of great value to their work.

Conclusion and follow-up

SURF and the Open Education SIG deem the strategic workshops a success, due to the enthusiastic responses and participants' clear willingness to openly share their knowledge and experiences. The participating institutions have attested to the usefulness of the workshops in converting broad ideas ('we need to do something with open and online education') into concrete projects and/or providing the initial impetus for forming a vision on open and online education.

In 2014, SURF will offer a follow-up to the strategic workshops. In addition to new workshops for institutions wishing to get started with open and online education, we are also considering follow-up activities aimed at the current cohort. During the workshops, higher education institutions frequently ask whether they can receive support if they continue on this route. Given the diversity in the plans of the participants (ranging from pilot projects to policymaking), any such assistance will need to take various forms.

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