

CHANGING CAREER DIRECTION FROM HIGHER EDUCATION TO VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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Abstract. *The article discusses the problem of overeducation which is described as a situation when individuals gain education higher than required in the labour market and, thus, fall into the so-called opportunity trap (Brown et al., 2011). Individuals' investment into their education does not meet the expectations: they must expand their career opportunities by changing a career direction towards vocational training. The article aims to reveal the reasons that lead to such a situation. The case analysis revealed three periods which characterize and explain transformations in individuals' considerations about the value of education and qualification. The 1st period describes a transition of graduates from secondary school to higher education institution. It reveals factors determining the choice of higher education institution. The 2nd period describes experiences of students in higher education system until changing their career for vocational training. The 3rd period reveals main reasons and factors of students' choices.*
Keywords: *overeducation, career direction, retraining, qualification extension, labour market.*

Introduction

The recent research (Meroni, Vera-Toscano, & Lombardi, 2014) shows that overeducation is a multi-sided phenomenon. In some countries such as Italy, Spain, Czech Republic and Japan, overeducation is always a trap, while it also might be a stepping-stone towards a match job in The Netherlands, Belgium, France, Poland, United Kingdom, Slovenia, Turkey, Portugal and Lithuania. Moreover, in Austria, Germany, Finland, Hungary, Norway and Estonia, overeducation changes its characteristics depending on the time period. It can be a trap or a stepping stone according to the months in which the job is found. Following Europe 2020 strategy Lithuania aims that at least 40 % of the younger generation acquires higher education. However, increasing investment in the human capital in order to gain as higher qualification as possible, but without getting the appropriate return, leads to the problem of overeducation. This leads to inconsistency in the labour force supply and demand in the labour market and reflects inefficiencies of both the systems. Higher education graduates fall into

the opportunity trap (Brown et al., 2011) when there are no opportunities to find a relevant job after acquiring higher education, and this encourages them to change career direction by choosing a profession of the lower qualification level. This trend is also reflected in the Lithuanian Department of Statistics data on the annually increasing number of higher education graduates entering vocational schools (2015; 2016). Since 2012, the number of higher education graduates, continuing their education in vocational education and training (VET), has significantly increased: only 21 in 2012, 84 in 2013, 380 in 2014 and over 1000 in 2016. When analysing this problem, it is important to identify over-education factors as well as the reasons which makes young graduates to choose vocational training as an alternative path. The article focuses on the following objectives:

- 1) Describe the trends of the labour force supply and demand in the Lithuanian labour market.
- 2) Identify factors, making highly qualified individuals to fall into the opportunity trap.
- 3) Disclose reasons, encouraging higher education graduates to gain a qualification in vocational schools.

The article analyses the problem of over-education and changing career direction, using the method of scientific literature and document analysis and case study. Data was collected using semi-structured interview and focus group discussion methods.

Career planning peculiarities combining higher education and vocational training opportunities

The main objective of education today is very much linked not only with the education of an individual but with his/her qualification as a key to the integration in the labour market and thus achieve a progress of the state. The aim of the Lithuanian strategic documents, which are based on the European Union's growth strategy, is that at least 48.7 percent of persons aged 30-34 had higher education. However, the opinion on the need of highly qualified individuals does not meet the actual demand of labour force in the labour market. Lithuania is still dominated by the transitional model of high skills formation when the supply of labour force with higher education does not meet the demand for jobs. Therefore, according to the forecast of the Lithuanian Labour Exchange (2014; 2015; 2016; 2017), Lithuania did not only achieved the goals set by the European Union for the preparation of highly qualified individuals, but also has a slight 1.63-percent surplus in the labour market. This surplus is distorted by the excess choice of studies in the field of social sciences. Nonetheless, there is also a considerable number of unqualified people in the labour market: the supply of such people

amounts to 13.43 percent, while the demand is for qualified employees, the shortage of whom amounts to 15.36 percent. Taking into account the interaction between the education system and the labour market in Lithuania, it is noted that education policy forms public opinion that the best career opportunities are available after acquiring higher education. However, taking into account the actual situation in the labour market, it is noted that all businesses are still developing and the need for highly qualified individuals is limited (Stasiūnaitienė et al., 2013; Tutlys, 2013).

When planning a career, the choice of higher education studies is linked to better career opportunities. The analysis of this topic is found in studies performed by Barone and Ortiz (2010), Geel and Backes-Gellner (2011), Lehmann (2008), Newhouse and Suryadarma (2015), Peiro, Agut and Grau (2010), Powell, Bernhard and Graf (2012). Such studies showed the problematic sides of the integration of people with higher education into the labour market. The problem exists that career planning at school age is mainly oriented to higher education without proper consideration of other alternative paths. As a consequence highly qualified individuals fall into the opportunity trap (Brown et al., 2011). The opportunity trap refers to the situation where individual's expectations when investing in human capital do not pay off because of the oversupply of highly qualified labour force in the labour market. This makes higher education graduates changing their career direction.

This situation is caused by more than one factor (Stasiūnaitienė et al., 2013):

- Rapid economic restructuring processes and growth in the unemployment rate led to the public opinion that higher education qualification provides a guarantee that one will not be unemployed;
- Stigmatisation of vocational training is specific to Lithuania and other post-Soviet countries. This negative attitude remained after the Soviet regime as then it was believed that vocational training closes all the opportunities for professional and personal development.
- Tutlys (2013) does not only support, but also complements the list of factors distinguished by Stasiūnaitienė et al. (2013):
- Increasing digital Taylorism (Tutlys, 2013), which is specific to knowledge-based economies when business development strategy and the development of modern technologies are based on operational standardisation, so there is no high demand for highly qualified individuals.
- Pursuit of social mobility when middle-class population invests in their children's higher education in order to ensure a higher social status.

Others:

- Studies, providing a university degree, are becoming increasingly attractive because they determine a further professional career and future salary. The acquisition of higher education is becoming a value for young people (Lamanauskas, Augienė, & Makarskaitė-Petkevičienė, 2012).
- However, there are students, for whom the most important result of higher education institutions is a diploma, justifying the acquisition of qualification rather than the acquisition of knowledge and skills (VPVI, 2010).
- New employment requirements posed by employers: the importance of key competences (Jurkšaitienė & Misiūnas, 2013).

The revealed typical factors indicate the prevailing overeducation problem, but they are very diverse. Therefore, they can be divided into micro factors and macro factors. Micro factors include the individual's internal views, attitudes, expectations, family situation, etc. Macro factors such as the opinion formed by education policy on the need for highly qualified individuals and the demand from employers which act as a stimulus for creating personal attitudes, i.e. micro factors. Other macro factors such as the emergence of digital taylorism and the limited number of jobs for highly qualified individuals are caused by rapidly developing economy. Micro factors arise for the following reasons: the prevailing attitudes in the society (stigmatisation of vocational training, a guarantee that one will not be unemployed), expectations for a better life (by getting a diploma, investment in human capital for a career and a higher salary, social mobility).

After reviewing the identified factors, it can be stated that the lack of cooperation between the education policy and the labour market in Lithuania contributed to the overeducation of some part of the labour force. Competition resulted in the oversupply of people with higher education in the labour market. In turn, this led to such consequences as unemployment, brain drain, need for retraining or expansion of qualification, which requires new investment both from an individual and the state's side.

When highly qualified specialists whose investment in human capital did not pay off because the returns received did not meet their expectations, it is noted that in such a situation, individuals start looking at their career more pragmatically and try a variety of career paths. This is revealed by career planning studies (Harris, Rainey, & Sumner, 2006; Wai-Ling Packard et al., 2012), which drew attention to the movement of career paths of highly qualified individuals in several directions when the movement takes place between different fields of science (social, technological, etc.) and types of educational institutions (vocational school, college, university)

According to the learning path study conducted by Harris et al. (2006), highly qualified individuals often choose vocational schools for the following reasons:

- Aim to broaden their career prospects at work, i.e. desire to work in another position in the same organisation.
- Early career planning, preparing another plan if the current career direction can no longer develop.
- Personal ambitions, the desire to invest in themselves and become a professional in a chosen field. However, the change in career direction takes place not only because of internal ambitions, but also because of the compulsory professional development in the workplace.
- Complete change in career direction by choosing studies that are opposite to the individual's current education, for instance, from philosophy to electronics. Such career changes have been done without knowing yourself and seeking help from a career consultant.

The employers surveys reveal that young graduates often lack not only practical skills but also specific, work related, and social skills (Jurkšaitienė & Misiūnas, 2013; Poviliūnas, Žiliukaitė, & Beresnevičiūtė, 2012). Stasiūnaitienė et al. (2013) state that because of the limited number of jobs for highly qualified individuals, young graduates fail to get a job according to their qualification and they tend to choose lower job positions and vocational training to acquire the missing skills.

Other authors (Barone & Ortiz, 2010; Blazqueza & Budr 2012; Brown et al., 2011; Peiro et al., 2010) note a negative impact of a structural imbalances of the labour market on the individual. Overeducation is linked to low productivity and poor job satisfaction. The identified reasons for the choice of higher education graduates to enter a vocational school can be divided into internal and external ones. Internal reasons are based on the individual's internal ambitions to pursue a professional career. Meanwhile, external reasons do not depend on personal needs, and the individual reacts to the current life situation or incentives from higher bodies. It is noted in the analysis of the career change phenomenon when higher education graduates decide to choose vocational training, both internal and external reasons are active while making a decision to change one's career. The enlargement of career opportunities by choosing vocational training is based on the extension of existing qualification or retraining.

Methodology

A case study as a method is used to understand complex social phenomena. When analysing the phenomenon of the change in the career direction of higher education graduates, the case study is defined by the choice of vocational training

as a complementary alternative. The chosen case study strategy allows seeing the causal relationship between significant life events (choice to study in the higher education institution, study period at a higher education institution and studying at a vocational school). Triangulation, semi-structured interview, focus group discussion, document analysis, analysis of study programmes and vocational training programmes are used to reveal these causal relationship. It is aimed to reveal how an individual seeks to retrain or extend his/her existing qualification by choosing vocational training. Two study instruments were used: interview composed of 7 questions, which allowed to reveal the process of the individual's career planning, and 4 questions for the discussion in a focus group, which provided additional information about the phenomenon. People who acquired higher education immediately after graduating from secondary school and continued their studies at a vocational school are key informants of the study. 3 men and 9 women were interviewed during the study. They were grouped by the level of their qualification: from bachelor to residency. 2 focus group discussions in different vocational schools were carried out (36 teachers). Participants of the focus group in each school were selected by their experience with the studied phenomenon. A content analysis was used to analyse the study data.

Findings

The study distinguished 3 key periods, revealing the career change phenomenon: transition of graduates from secondary school to higher education institution; study experience until choosing vocational training; the process of choosing vocational training and experience of studying at a vocational school. Quotes from the interview (In) and the focus group (FG) are provided.

1st period. Identification of factors, determining the choice of higher education, which include: family, society, employers and educational institutions (secondary school, higher education institution and vocational school). Influence of society is reflected by the dominant stereotypical views that higher education is mandatory in order to enter the labour market.

In. „<...> more people enrolled to higher education institutions, everybody spoke of the need for higher education, that without higher education you will work as a cleaner, you will earn nothing. It is just necessary. Higher education is mandatory.“ (J4). Some secondary school graduates see the requirements posed by employers by analysing employment ads, In. „<...> as far as I read different ads, employers are looking for people with higher education <...>.“ (J6), and others linked the choice of studies to continuous activity after school. In. „It was just a continuation of what to do after school and I did not think about job at that time because it seemed very far away <...>“ (J2).

Influence of secondary school community is reflected by misleading and directing professional guidance. In. "And if, God forbid, you got a lower mark or you are not so good in some subjects, you are always threatened that you will be studying at a vocational school and then your life will probably end." (J2), due to the aim to raise the school's ranking in the society. FG. „<...> secondary schools, especially gymnasiums, are ranked and one of the criteria is how many graduates enrolled to universities and, of course, the school wants to look good in the eyes of the society, because it brings money to it.“ (A5). Focus group discussion data demonstrated that vocational schools themselves are passive in the area of marketing, while higher education institutions actively provide misleading marketing about qualifications provided. FG. „...Study programmes offered by higher education institutions just sound good, their titles really sound good, but when you have to find a job then the problem arises.“ (B1). Despite the distinguished factors, family has the greatest influence on the choice of higher education, where especially active role is performed by mothers. In. „Maybe I just should take more time to decide on where and what I would like to do, but I felt a lot of pressure from my parents, especially from my mom, that I should not take any breaks because then it would be very difficult to start learning again.“ (J8). It should be emphasised that the identified factors influenced secondary school graduates only when they did not discover themselves in professional activities. The study revealed the choice of study programmes mainly depends on the state examination results. In case of the failure to enrol to the desired study programme, other choices were based on the aspiration to enrol to any study programme. Choices of those individuals were determined by the price of studies. The identified factors show that studies chosen by the informants do not have a reasonable basis for their career development in the future.

2nd period reveals experiences of studying in higher education institutions, which had an impact on further career planning. There are three processes of experience: self-awareness; maturation and analysis of the labour market. The process of labour market analysis involves both practical experience in the labour market (requirements posed by employers when trying to get a job) and theoretical (analysing the situation in the labour market, which reveals the supply of individuals). In. „... one hundred vets are prepared per year, which is way too many for Lithuania.“ (J7). The process of self-awareness involves both awareness of one's personal characteristics and awareness of oneself as a future professional in the chosen study programme. Most of the students realised during the study process, especially during practice, that they will not link their future with the chosen qualification. In. „...I liked my studies, but after graduating I realised that I really do not want to link my job to history...“ (J1). The process of maturity occurs through personal psychological maturity as further career decisions are made on the basis of self-awareness rather than the influence of family or society.

In. <...> I am no longer a secondary school graduate, I have already graduated from the university and I have my own plans, and I start to live independently and think for myself. (J8). It is revealed that the higher education institution acted as a maturity institution for students, i.e. secondary school graduates have not yet discovered themselves, had no need for the labour market analysis and were influenced by the family in making career-related decisions. However, all these processes have been changed in the higher education institution. This suggests that adequate career decisions are taken later, when individuals have more independence from their families and more life experience.

3rd period revealed the reasons for the choice of vocational training. Based on the experience gained in the higher education institution, some students decided to prepare a backup plan, if the first one fails. In. „<...> I always have a backup plan in my life. You will learn not only in your field, but you go to another field because you are afraid of the failure. (J11). At the same time it is aimed to access such social guarantees as allowance or public transport incentives during the study period. In. „In fact, I am an orphan and I get money from the state as long as I am studying and turn 24.“ (J11). In some cases the choice is determined by the need for the improvement at work required by employers. In. „If there was no requirement for that hygiene standard at the office, I would not be here <...>“ (J9). Awareness of professional vocation has become the reason for the majority of the informants to change their career direction by choosing vocational training. A discovery of a vocation was based on the analysis of the previous experience, looking for an answer which activity was successful and satisfying. In. „<...> I had the opportunity to work in Retriever kennel for three summers, which I believe also had a great influence <...>“ (J8). The choice of vocational training is linked to the fulfilment of dreams in professional activities. FG. „...finally, I will do what I want, I used to hear even such words. I will do what I want and what I have dreamed of...“ (A3). Although at the same time, the choice of other informants is associated with self-discovery in the hope that the chosen occupational area will be a niche for the realisation of their potential. In. „<...> I just wanted to enrol and succeed.“ (J3).

Additional analysis of higher education study programmes and vocational training programmes revealed the significance of the choice of vocational training on the extension of career opportunities. The informants, who decide to be retrained on the basis of their current qualification, link their future to business establishment. Others aim to extend their higher education qualification for the opportunity to get additional activities at work and thus generate additional income.

Discussion

The analysis of the career change phenomenon when higher education graduates choose vocational training revealed a real-life context that includes both the factors, determining the choice of higher education, and processes during studies, which have an impact on the emergence of the phenomenon (see Figure 1).

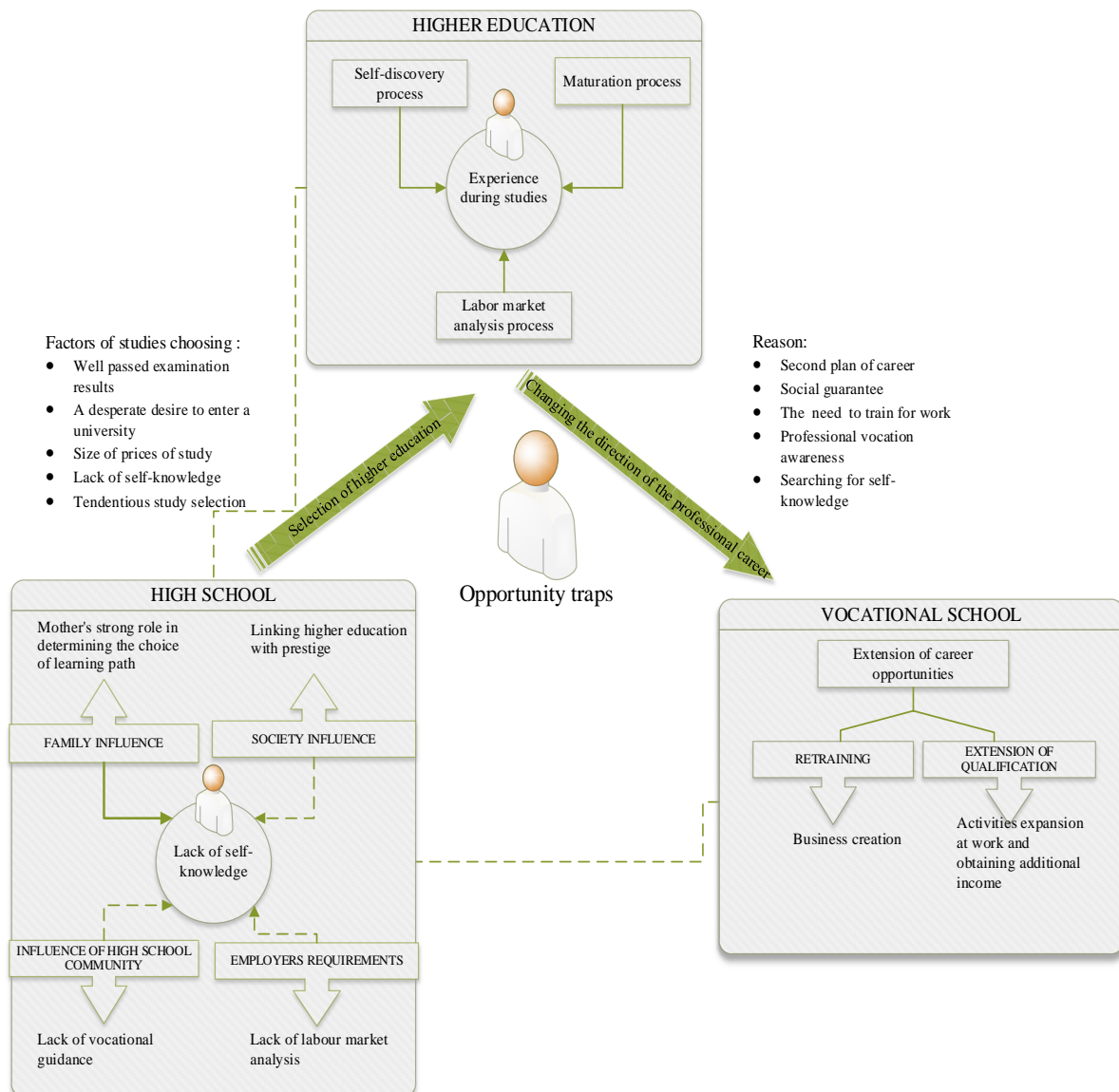


Figure 1 Process of changing career direction of higher education graduates

The highlighted aspects of the influence of educational institutions confirm and at the same time complement factors revealed in the theoretical part. The influence of the secondary school community on the professional decision is

reflected by the lack of experienced professional guidance and stigmatisation of vocational training, which is also argued by Tutlys (2013) and Stasiūnaitienė et al. (2013). At the same time, the study revealed the factor associated with the aim to look prestigious and maintain the necessary number of students by guiding pupils to higher education institutions. Human resources-related objectives of the Lithuanian progress strategy “Lietuva 2030” had an impact on the formation of active career counselling and guidance focused mainly on higher education institutions. Meanwhile, vocational education and training system faces the lack of external communication with students and cooperation with social partners. These disadvantages contribute to the negative attitude towards vocational training in the country.

The study revealed the influence of the family and particularly the mother’s role as the strongest factor, determining the secondary school graduate’s choice of professional path. This is due to the desire for social mobility, the ambition to secure the desired position in the society (Tutlys, 2013). The adjusting aspect of the influence of the family has emerged: the strong role of the mother, which is strongly expressed by forbidding to choose vocational training. Interest of secondary school graduates in the labour market is based solely on rumours and browsing through employment ads. Secondary school graduates are not familiar with the concept of the labour market analysis, and the choice of higher education is more associated with continuous activities after school. It is observed that the acquisition of higher education is associated with the creation of the added value in the competition for qualified job positions, so it changes Stasiūnaitienė et al.’s (2013) perception that the acquisition of higher education provides a guarantee that one will not be unemployed. This shows that young people are beginning to understand the disappearance of boundaries between higher education and vocational qualifications in terms of employment.

The study demonstrated that secondary education graduates are influenced by surrounding factors when choosing their studies rather than self-awareness. They linked graduation from the higher education institution to meeting expectations of their family by bringing them a diploma. The study revealed that the completed study programmes when chosen accidentally or because of the attractive study price, do not have a reasonable basis for further career planning.

The analysis of the career change phenomenon revealed an important moment of maturity and self-awareness during the study period. This period is associated with the corrective actions and decision made previously in the secondary school. Moreover, during studies at the university or college students better understand requirements of employers as well as the importance of practical skills, which also makes them to reconsider their career plans.

The revealed reasons for the choice of vocational training are justified by the study conducted by Harris et al. (2006) who distinguishes the internal awareness of professional vocation, requirements posed by employers, preparation of a backup plan as the reasons for the career change. There are combinations of even several reasons, determining the change in career direction by choosing vocational training. Typically several years of studies at university or college were needed for young people to understand what professional career they want to develop. During the study period, students discovered themselves through internships or other practical activities.

It is important that the choice of vocational training made by study participants is based on pragmatic values distinguished by Januškevičienė et al. (2012). These values are distinguished in the context of a career when retraining or expanding the existing qualification. Retraining higher education graduates link their professional future to the establishment of business, while those expanding their higher education qualification aim to generate additional income and expand activities at work.

Conclusions

1. Lithuania is still dominated by the transitional model of high skills formation when the supply of high skilled labour force does not meet the demand of jobs. However, following the strategic national objectives influenced by the EU policy in education and human resources development, Lithuania has a very strong public opinion that the best career opportunities are available after acquiring higher education. The tendency, yet, indicates, that the country needs improvement of its career counselling system, which is the weakest at the level of secondary education.
2. The study revealed the prevalence of macro and micro factors, making highly qualified individuals to fall into the opportunity trap. Macro factors include the family, society, employers and educational institutions (secondary schools, vocational schools and higher education institutions). The career choice of secondary school pupils is influenced by the stereotypical opinion on the unavoidable need for higher education studies. This opinion prevails at all levels. Micro factors emerged on the basis on macro factors as pursuit for prestige, diploma and high salary. The study revealed that accidentally chosen study programmes rarely form a solid basis for the development of the acquired qualification in the future. This is influenced by the lack of self-awareness, state examination results, fear to disappoint family members and other factors.

3. Reasons for the choice of vocational training are associated with the experiences gained during the study period, such as self-awareness, maturity, the need for the labour market analysis and self-discovery in professional activities. The study distinguished the reasons, determining the choice of vocational training: learning more about and understanding a specific vocation, coming across the requirements posed by the employers for qualification development, preparation of a backup plan. The case studies disclosed that higher education graduates which participated in the retraining actions (acquired different qualification at VET than that at university or college), associated their professional future with the establishment of business, while those, extending their higher education qualification (acquiring qualification close or similar to that gained at university/college), seek additional income and new activities at work.

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