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Towards a National Quality Assurance System
for the Greek Adult Education

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Towards a National Quality Assurance System for the Greek Adult Education

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Abstract: The GSAE has piloted (2006-2008) the national quality assurance & assessment framework (NQAF) following the general principles of the Common Quality Assurance Framework for VET in Europe (CQAF). According to the Greek framework each Adult Learning and Education Provider (ALEP) designs and implements self-evaluation procedures for its programs following national program evaluation standards and procedures. In addition, audit procedures carried out by external evaluators in all 13 regions of the country to ensure accountability and quality improvement. Finally, GSAE has been engaged in a discussion of developing a National Competency Framework (NCF) to assess learner achievements and performance. Overall six key competencies (i.e. organizational, technical, cultural, personal, civic, communicative) have been developed to assess prior learning as well as to validate the Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes adult learners acquire after completing an educational program. This paper will present the responce of the Greek Adult Educational System to the European quality assurance policies.

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Competence Frameworks, Program Evaluation, Self-Evaluation, External Evaluation, Lifelong Learning Providers, Adult Education

Introduction

THE DEVELOPMENT OF adult education in Greece has been closely linked to socio-economic, ideological and political factors. Ever since the modern Greek state came into being, the need to induct people into a homogenous citizenry with appropriate skills to enhance productivity and to foster patriotic sentiments became an educational must. Thus a stratified system of education based on ages, abilities and discipline specialization evolved. Adult education was as a consequence relegated to the informal realm, and, where it occurred, it served to make up for the failure of formal education and the literacy and vocational limitations of individuals. Ideological homogenisation and compensatory rationale characterised adult education provision since 19th century (Kalantzis & Cope, 2003).

However, Greece's increasing integration into the European Community has fuelled an expanding interest in adult learning over recent years. In the 1990s changes in the labour market and funds made available by the European Commission have encouraged and supported significant growth of activities, mostly concerning the vocational training of adults. As a consequence, there are now a growing number of training providers in the public and private sector[1] working mostly with local authorities, social partners and non-profit enterprises. Collaboration and co-ordination of diverse providers at a national level emerged as an important systemic challenge in securing quality, efficiency and accountability.

The 21st century brought the need for urgent reforms in the area of quality assurance at organisational, learner and system levels as the European Union (EU) is advocating and encouraging labour and skills mobility across national borders. The main EU lifelong learning policies constitute the background for the present framework of activities in adult education in Greece. This paper will focus on recent developments in the area of quality assurance, as applied to the Greek adult education system, which is supervised by the General Secretariat of Adult Education.

Adult Education and European Lifelong Learning Policy

Acquiring and continuously updating a high level of knowledge, skills and competencies is considered a prerequisite for the personal development of all citizens and for active participation in all aspects of post-modern societies. More than ever before, globalcitizens are expected to contribute actively to society, and must learn to live and work positively with cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity (Kalantzis & Cope 2003 and Arvanitis, 2006).

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[1] Adult education provision in Greece was mainly run by public sector up until the 1980s, although numerous private providers emerged after 1990 due European funding, but with no proper regulatory framework (Vergidis & Prokou 2005).

More specifically, global learners[2], citizens and workers require generic competencies, which are not limited to routine manual and cognitive skills to enhance self-directed and transformative learning. These contemporary competencies, according to research studies (Freire, 1973, Merizow, 1991, Brookfield, 1991, Kalantzis & Cope, 2003 and Jarvis, 2004) may refer to: a) complex communication skills (e.g. negotiation, debating, communicating ideas, team skills, partnerships, social communication, intra- & interpersonal skills); b) expert thinking skills (new knowledge & science, interpretation of mathematical/textual data and symbols); c) social and cultural competencies (e.g. empathy, managing diversity, belongingness, living with values); and d) leadership skills (e.g. initiation, decision-making, creativity).

Education systems in Europe have had to change very rapidly over the last decade in order to keep up with constant changes and demands for new skills and competences in the employment market. In this context, 'lifelong and life-wide' learning has become a widely accepted policy objective in the 21st century, for enhancing employability and greater mobility of skills. It is also regarded as a necessary condition for promoting the idea of active citizenship and a new progressive and multicultural citizenry that is comfortable with the multi national character of the EU.

The European Council held in Lisbon in March 2000 marked a decisive moment for the direction of policy and action in the European Union. The conclusions of the Lisbon European Council confirmed that the move towards lifelong learning must accompany a successful transition to a knowledge-based economy and society. Lifelong learning is no longer just one aspect of education and training. It became the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts (formal, non-formal, informal) and this in synergy with the relevant issues of youth, employment, social inclusion and research policies. The strategic objective set out by the Lisbon European Council in March 2000 was to enable the EU to become by the year 2010 the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, able to sustain economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. Europe's future was viewed to depend on the extent to which its citizens can face global economic and social challenges (European Commission, 2001).

In this context, lifelong learning was aimed to:

- "Guarantee universal and continuing access to learning for gaining and renewing the skills needed for sustained participation in the knowledge society;
- Visibly raise levels of investment in human resources in order to place priority on Europe's most important asset – its people;
- Develop effective teaching and learning methods and contexts for the continuum of lifelong and lifewide learning;
- Significantly improve the ways in which learning participation and outcomes are understood and appreciated, particularly non-formal and informal learning;
- Ensure that everyone can easily access good quality information and advice about learning opportunities throughout Europe and throughout their lives;
- Provide lifelong learning opportunities as close to learners as possible, in their own communities and supported through ICT-based facilities wherever appropriate". (European Commission, 2000)

One of the basic provisions of lifelong learning is adult education, which enables adults to improve their own skills, knowledge and competencies within a personal, civic, social, and/or employment-related perspective (European Commission, 2004a). Adult Education, in its broadest sense, is the key to learning and understanding how to meet modern social and economic challenges by promoting two equally important aims for lifelong learning, namely pro*moting active citizenship* and *employability*. However, adult education is not an explicitly vocational sector as it is able to combine vocational learning with the learning of broader life skills and learning for enjoyment, individual well-being and personal enrichment. It is also distinguished by its focus on the community as it is committed to and owned by the community as no other sector does (Jarvis, 2004). Creating learning communities as places of integrated learning and transformation, building on social capital as well as striving for more inclusive and participatory societies are the raison d'être of adult education. It finally, more than any other sector, embraces the needs and interests of the learner (Kalantzis & Cope, 2003) and values learning in all its forms (formal, non-formal and informal), thereby enhancing equity.

Moreover, the emerging EU funding over the last years raised awareness on the necessity for lifelong learning, which has consequently led to enormous growth in education and training provisions at the

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[2] Learning is the key for innovation society via *Basic knowledge* (ability to learn and generate knowledge), *professional skills* (higher skills demand lead to stronger expertise and continuous learning), *key competencies* (self-management, community and work related knowledge and skills lead to generic abilities and meta-learning) as well as *creativity and innovation* (courage, challenging and pro-activeness) (Kalantzis & Cope, 2005)

level of adult education, often outside of the formal school system. It has also widened the number of players who design and deliver adult education, particularly in the workplace. The principle of subsidiarity and the formation of extended partnerships, in which the Union, the Member States, the regional and local actorss, as well as the social partners and local society will be actively involved, was seen as an ensuring factor for lifelong learning activities.

However, reaching the EU benchmarks and goals for 2010 poses a serious challenge for education and training systems in Europe[3]. The first joint interim report (European Commission Interim Report, 2004b) from the European Council and the European Commission on progress towards the Lisbon goals for education and training acknowledges significant deficits in implementing lifelong learning across Europe. The report suggested that in Europe, adult learning is either too closely linked with employability or too strongly associated with compensatory education. The latter appears to be the case in Greece (Vergidis & Prokou, 2005). With respect to this concrete reality, the manifested in the EU inadequate levels of investment in human resources can only be improved by raising the contribution of the private sector, and by harnessing the potential and benefits of diverse public-private partnerships.

Furthermore, the knowledge economy and information society as well as accountability and regulatory expectations have created new requirements in securing quality in adult education. As the opportunities for the general public to acquire new knowledge increased, and people became aware of the importance of constantly updating their skills, it has become difficult to ensure proper quality of the training provided. This called for a comprehensive system of cross-sectoral partnership at the European level, that could provide accreditation and certification of education and training outside of the formal school system. Non-formal and informal providers of adult education and training required a system for proving -and improving- the quality of their training, while employers and consumers need to be able to base choices on evaluation of this quality.

Thus, the main future policy challenges at European level were set to be: a) increased investments, both private and public, in human resources to ensure economic prosperity and social cohesion; b) higher levels of participation in adult learning; and c) rapid education and training system reforms in areas such as accreditation, certification and quality assurance. In this context, EU advocates that all state members shall make the necessary provisions for national accreditation systems, which will be comparable to each other. This will enhance labour mobility across all states in the EU and create a highly skilled workforce with multicultural sensibilities (European Commission Interim Report, 2004b).

Quality Assurance in Adult Education

The fragmented and diverse nature of informal and non-formal adult learning makes quality assurance a difficult task. Quality assurance is seen as an umbrella term referring to an ongoing and continuous process of evaluating the quality[4] of educational providers and programs, for improvement purposes. Major European reports suggest that quality assurance for adult education can be applied at three different levels, namely at: a) the organizational level concerning organizational processes and quality management models (ISO & EFQM); b) the learner level concerning the assessment and accreditation and recognition of informal and non-formal learning outcomes; and c) the system level concerning legislation and monitoring authorities[5] (EAEA, 2006, p. 40).

Quality assurance was seen as a prerequisite of accreditation and skills recognition in the area of life long learning and adult education. In international debates on education and training strategy[6] the latter is being regarded as a key challenge, which can only be secured through the development of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs). International experience[7] has shown that implementing national qualifications and accreditation systems promotes lifelong learning and enhances access to qualifications.

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[3] European adult learning participation rates are lower than those of its major global competitors, whether in higher education, adult education or continuing vocational training. The Feira European Council in June 2000 asked the Member States, the Council and the Commission, within their areas of competence, to identify coherent strategies and practical measures with a view to fostering lifelong learning for all.

[4] Quality here represents a multi-dimensional and dynamic concept closely related to the contextual settings, the mission and specific objectives of the adult education sector stakeholders as well as the available standards and resources (UNESCO, 2004).

[5] More-specifically, the purposes of quality assurance in the context of adult education include a) "the assessment of relevance of the learning outcomes to the needs of the learners, b) the efficiency and organization of the learning processes using available resources, c) transparency about educational provision and equal access to learning, d) transparency in accreditation and recognition of learning outcomes as well as transition between learning pathways, e) increase of learners' motivation and participation rates". (EAEA, 2006, p.40-41).

[6] The European Commission, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD www.oecd.org) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) agree that the development of national qualifications frameworks represents one of the main initiatives in addressing the challenges of skills recognition and in promoting life long learning.

[7] The OECD report in 2003 (www.oecd.org/edu/adultlearning) includes the adult learning policies and experiences in several countries such as Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland U.K. and U.S.

A National Qualification Framework is essentially a framework, which classifies and registers qualifications of different educational sectors including VET, according to a set of nationally agreed standards for levels of learning/skills obtained. The most advanced qualification systems (Australia, UK, South Africa & New Zealand) include flexible training pathways, articulation and credit transfer as well as national competency frameworks with specific levels of attainment and curriculum standards. Recognition of Prior Learning (either via assessment agencies- fee for service or via a national Training Authority) is closely aassociated with the development of a national qualifications framework[8]. Generally a NQF gives greater recognition to the adult education sector as it yields a pattern of learning that is not bounded by time or location, whereas it supports learning across different educational pathways (i.e. academic and vocational), or integrate formal and non-formal learning, notably learning in the workplace (Arvanitis, 2005). Countries such as Australia, New Zealand have promoted adult and community education by establishing national coordinating bodies to ensure a flexible system of credit transfer, accreditation, quality and recognition of prior learning but at the same time they have allowed decentralised processes of delivering learning programs. Decentralisation as well as access and participation in learning programs are important pillars in lifelong learning policies.

Moreover, national qualification systems are built on pedagogy of demonstrable performance in real world situations, which is based on, clearly stated educational and social targets as well as learning processes. In this context the adult learning approach has very much a learner-centred orientation, which values learning and basic skills acquisition and it focuses on equal learning opportunities, innovative pedagogy, quality and relevance of learning possibilities (European Commission, 2001). The formulation of a competence framework emerged as a scaffold to assess performance and the acquisition of generic skills and it constitutes an important dimension of a National Qualifications System (Arvanitis, 2005). The competencies agenda has gained wide acceptance amongst several countries, transnational communities and organizations.

Recently the European community has adopted the term *competencies* ('Key competencies') to refer to the achievement of a higher degree of integration between capabilities and the broader social objectives that an individual has. The term refers to a transfer-able, multifunctional package of knowledge, skills and attitudes that all individuals need for personal fulfillment, social inclusion and employability (European Commission, 2004c). In addition, Eurydice surveys have shown that currently in adult education, the emphasis lies on competencies such as ICT, adult literacy and numeracy, foreign languages, mother tongue and language of host country. Other important areas for future development were thought to be learning to learn skills, further development of adult literacy and numeracy, entrepreneurship, interpersonal and civic competences, cultural awareness and foreign languages. The proposed EU competence framework for both schools[9] and vocational training is interrelated to the adult education programs. Any decision about a national accreditation framework has direct implication for adult community and vocational training curriculum as it determines how entry levels, including prior learning, and exit levels are specified and legitimised.

In addition, the development of a competency-based Curriculum with, relevance, credibility and learning pathways is required to ensure high performance as well as more autonomy at local level in developing educational guidelines. It is through cross-curricular objectives and activities that the key generic or transversal competencies can be ascertained. In such an open curriculum one can distinguish between basic levels of competency attainment from more advanced ones. In this respect teacher professional training is an important parameter in ensuring cross-curricular activities and competence-based approach to education (Kalantzis & Cope, 2005).

European member states have so far put different targets and priorities to promote curricular and accreditation reforms, although more data is needed to support this evolving agenda. Providing accreditation and assessment of learning opportunities has also changed the way lifelong learning is perceived in Greece, although no significant consultation and public dialogue has occurred. Cross-sectoral collaboration in this respect has become an important challenge of the system itself. Accreditation efforts have been segregated and limited to the activities of separate sectors of the educational system. The General Secretariat of Adult Education provides an example of increased activity in the area of developing a national quality assurance system for adult learning.

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[8] The need to recognize/accredit prior learning is an essential feature of a national qualification framework, and it is regarded as an important means of facilitating participation in formal education and training. It is also viewed as a means of enhancing employability, labor mobility, career prospects, community participation and active citizenship.

[9] The Eurydice survey has found out that school curricula in Europe are more focusing on the successful application of knowledge and skills rather than the transmission of knowledge itself. There is now a general emphasis on subject-based knowledge, skills and attitudes and a more explicit reference to the concept of key competencies in European curricula in countries such as Belgium, England, Wales, Scotland and Portugal (Eurydice, 2002, pp. 31-32).

Towards a Greek National Quality Assurance Framework

The General Secretariat of Adult Education (GSAE) and the Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs implement adult education planning and delivery in Greece. The Secretariat's mission is the provision of cost-free life long learning opportunities to all citizens regardless of their socio-economic status, level of education, place of birth and religion, in order to develop basic and new basic skills and knowledge for their personal and professional development. The Secretariat oversees the Institute of Continuing Adult Education (IDEKE), which implements the full range of general and adult education provisions. It also accredits educational programs and awards qualifications that facilitate entry to pathways of other learning opportunities (CONFINTEA Greek National Report, 2008).

Since 2004, adult education services provided by the Secretariat have shown some growth, which is secured by the European Structural Fund. Thus, during the period 2004 - 2008 an overall 110 million euros were allocated by both the European Union and the Greek State in building infrastructures and equipment for adult education providers. The Secretariat, during the period 2004-2008, has also expanded its educational provision by operating more than 400 units across the country. Regional educational institutions such as Second Chance Schools, Adult Education Centres, Parent Schools and distant learning programs as well as autonomous programs referring to computer literacy, language teaching and health education offered more than 690.591 educational places. In 2008 alone some 192.483 adults participated in adult learning programs. However, official EU figures for 2006 show a very low (1,9%) adult participation rate (age 25-64) in Greece compared to the EU benchmark for 2010 (12,5%). The Secretaritat's official figures suggest that in 2008 the adult participation rate (age 17-67) was 2,6% of the target population (GSAE, 2008), revealing a slow progress.

Thus, improving quality of the Greek adult education system became a fundamental challenge in order to meet the EU benchmarks and to ensure quality. The Secretariat, sought to develop a mechanism to ensure consistency, transparency, quality and accountability of educational providers, since these issues emerged as a core priority in public consultation and in external and learner's evaluation reports.

A National Quality Office was established at the Secretariat in 2007 in order to implement the National Quality Assurance Framework. The framework was based on the general principles of the Common Quality Assurance Framework for VET in Europe (CQAF, 2004) and it constituted a set of common evaluation specifications and criteria for all public providers and autonomous programs. The main objective of the framework was the monitoring and the continuous improvement of educational provision through processes of self-assessment and evaluation of adult education providers. The Secretariat piloted the national quality assurance framework (NQAF) for a period of two years (2006-2008). According to the framework each provider designed and implemented self-evaluation procedures for its programs, following nationally recommended program evaluation standards and procedures (Kalantzis & Arvanitis 2006 & GSAE, 2007).

The main mechanisms, which were used to evaluate the quality of Adult Education programs during the pilot period focused mainly on quality assurance at the organizational and learner levels. Overall, a 63% of the Secretariat's providers completed their self-evaluation reports focusing on: a) the evaluation of the organization and its operation (administrational procedures, management and leadership, resources and outcomes/educational pathways); and b) the quality of the educational process (teaching methods, training packages and contents, learner assessment model, teacher evaluation procedures and training).

Although the pilot implementation has been concluded, there are limited research findings to support the progress made in the area of quality assurance and how policy initiatives have affected adult learning in Greece. However, unpublished observational data suggested that the accreditation of learning outcomes has become a pressing issue amongst the stakeholders. The adoption of a proposed National Competency Framework (Kalantzis & Cope, 2004) to assess learner achievements and performance (mainly in the Second Chance Schools and the Adult Education Centres) is still under review. Implementing the six generic competencies (i.e. *organizational, technical, cultural, personal, civic, communicative*) for both, assessing the k*nowledge, skills and attitudes* as well as recognizing prior learning of adult learners, remains a challenge that requires policy initiative and extensive professional in-service training. On the other hand developing the Secretariat's program of accreditation and credit transfer system is an evolving idea, which is thought to enhance quality, program attractiveness and educational mobility. However, the absence of a national qualifications framework hinders the success and wider recognition of the Secretariat's certificates,[10]according to stakeholders who participated in the pilot implementation.

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[10] The Secretariat offers two main cohorts of national qualifications/certificates, namely, i) A certificate of compulsory education (via Second Chance Schools) equivalent to level 2 of European Qualifications Framework and (ISCED level 2) and ii) the Lifelong Learning Certificates for its 250 hour programs equivalent to level 4 of European Qualifications Framework and ISCED level 3 (CONFIDEA, 2008).

Furthermore, establishing a quality culture emerged as an issue of paramount importance during the pilot period, because stakeholders were characterized by hesitation and resistance to implementing evaluation procedures. This is because generally the Greek educational system is lacking of shared, accepted and integrated principles of quality (Paleocrassas 1997 & Solomon, 1999). Inconsistent applications of education assessment reforms as well as dubious inspection policies in the past created an environment of scepticism and negativity amongst stakeholders, thereby hindering the success of quality assurance efforts during the pilot implementation.

Finally, the lack of professional expertise in accreditation and quality assurance procedures led the vast majority of stakeholders to indicate the need for further training in the areas such as adult education, instructional and curriculum design, competency frameworks, learners' needs, holistic assessment, organisational development and leadership. Also there were stressed local planning, ownership; and community consultation as well as cross-sectoral partnerships and recognition. Overall it became evident that quality of staff, motivation and professional development of adult educators and personnel is a vital determinant for the quality of adult education in Greece. As a response, the Secretariat has made considerable effort with regards to the professional development of trainers of adults by establishing the Centre of Education and Training of Trainers as well as delivering a professional e-learning program.

Conclusions

Developing a quality assurance framework for adult education in Greece has proven to be a difficult and complex task requiring major changes at multiple levels. At the systemic level, quality assurance can be appropriated through legislation and by establishing mechanisms for co-ordination and quality assurance . This might be achieved provided that different educational sectors and providers (both public and private) will agree to a set of frameworks for perform-
ance expectations, curriculum design, quality indicators and accreditation schemes. Greater collaboration and cross-sectoral recognition could integrate adult education programs with provision of vocational training , technical education and even higher education. In this context, the National Committee for life Long Learning[11] could undertake appropriate policy initiatives for developing a National Qualifications System to allow for credit transfers from one sector to the other (school, vocational, adult and tertiary) meeting education needs of local populations and promoting educational mobility within the Greek State and in EU.

On the other hand, the expansion of the Adult Education Sector under the auspices of the Secretariat reached to a point where urgent reforms are needed in securing quality provision and accreditation of educational programs at both the organisational and the learner levels. The quality of educational delivery becomes important as adult educators need a curriculum design framework to provide guidelines on how the teacher might design a learning experience so that it can be accessed by learners (as a student resource) and other educators (as a teacher resource). Design frameworks need to be open, flexible, collaborative spaces for adult educators in order to make more explicit the choices they have as they meet a particular or set of learning goals at a local level (Kalantzis & Cope, 2005). The development and implementation of a national competency framework will ensure a holistic assessment as well as constant monitoring and updating of adult generic competencies required in a globalised society.

Finally, developing a culture of evaluating quality in all aspects of policy planning and program delivery, has proven to be a dynamic process requiring close collaboration of all stakeholders, as people are often uncertain of the "real" purpose of evaluations and become hostile to the bureaucracy that evaluations may involve. The development of national qualifications and competency frameworks can help to ensure quality delivery and innovation, improve educational performance and assess the efficiency of policy interventions.

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[11] The National Committee of Lifelong Learning aims to ascertain the needs of lifelong education and training, to evaluate the overall quality of delivery and to co-ordinate the institutions of lifelong education and training as well as to oversee their interconnection with the National System of Connecting Vocational Education and Training with Employment (CONFINTEA, 2008).

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Eugenia Arvanitis was born on the Ionian island of Lefkada in Greece. She graduated from the Department of Elementary School Education at the University of Ioannina, Greece in 1992. In 2001 Eugenia became the first international doctoral exchange student to complete a Doctoral Thesis in Education at RMIT (Faculty of Education, Language and Community Services) from the University of Ioannina, Greece. As part of her studies she has been involved in research on Greek ethnic schools in Australia. Her research interests include multicultural educational policy and practice; ethnic community development and identity; community building education, and teachers' training. She has attended and presented papers at several conferences in Australia and overseas. Between 2001 and 2004 Eugenia co-ordinated and taught the Greek Language and Cultural Studies Program at the School of International and Community Studies, and was employed as the Manager of the Australian-Greek Resource and Learning Center at RMIT University, Melbourne. In November 2004 Eugenia was offered the position of Honorary Associate Researcher at the Globalism Institute at RMIT University, Melbourne. As part of her role Eugenia works with Professor Mary Kalantzis in developing a Learning Competency/Accreditation Framework for the Greek Ministry of Education. She finally engages in personnel training for the Greek Adult Educational System and publication activities.

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