UKÄ UNIVERSITETS KANSLERS ÄMBETET

Guidelines for reviewing HEI quality assurance processes for education and research

Guidelines for Reviewing HEI Quality Assurance Processes for Education and Research
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Foreword

This is a guideline which describes the process followed by the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) when reviewing higher education institutions' (HEI) quality assurance processes for education and research.

The guidelines explain the purpose, principles and content of the reviews, as well as the different stages of the review process.

The guidelines are reviewed on an ongoing basis and revised when necessary.

This version applies from 7 October 2025 and covers higher education institutions whose reviews commence in 2026 or later.

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Introduction

Universities and university colleges[1] in Sweden are responsible for ensuring that their education and research are of high quality. One of UKÄ's responsibilities is to ensure that higher education institutions (HEIs) fulfil this responsibility for quality. Provisions governing UKÄ's responsibility for quality assurance of the activities of HEIs are set out in Sections 1 and 2 of Regulation (2012:810) containing government instructions for the Swedish Higher Education Authority**.**

Against this background, UKÄ conducts several types of reviews:

- appraisals of applications for degree-awarding powers
- institutional reviews of HEI quality assurance processes
- programme evaluations
- thematic evaluations.

The overarching objective of UKÄ's reviews is to aid in ensuring that the education and research conducted at Swedish HEIs are of high quality.

The review methodology has been developed in dialogue with representatives of higher education institutions, the Swedish National Union of Students (SFS), employers, UKÄ's reference groups, and a selection of quality assurance organisations within the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

Drawing on the experiences from the 2017–2022 review cycle, UKÄ has further revised its methodology.[1]

Purpose and Focus

The purpose of UKÄ's institutional review of HEI quality assurance processes is both to verify that HEIs achieve high quality in their activities and to contribute to HEI quality development.

The term quality system, which is used in UKÄ's review, refers to the systematic nature of the HEI quality assurance processes. By quality system, we mean the structure or framework that the HEI has for its quality assurance processes. The quality system includes both the documented conditions, in the form of organisation, distribution of

[1] *För ökad kvalitet – en utvecklad metod för UKÄ:s granskningar*, UKÄ 2024, Dnr 412-00045-24

responsibilities and policy documents, and the procedures and working methods used to work with both quality assurance and quality development. A quality system should clarify the relationship between different parts of the organisation (e.g. how goals, policy documents and activities are related).

An effective quality system includes an effective continuous improvement process. By an effective improvement process, we mean that the HEI works systematically to monitor and evaluate its activities, and uses the results to achieve high quality in education and research.

UKÄ's reviews of HEI quality assurance processes focus on whether the institution's quality assurance processes contribute, in a systematic and appropriate manner, to assuring and enhancing the quality of education and research. The HEI must be able to demonstrate that it organises the quality assurance processes and applies its quality system in an effective manner.

UKÄ conducts follow-up reviews of all institutional reviews, regardless of the overall judgement awarded (see Follow-up, p. 20).

Basis for UKÄ's Assessments

Legislation and Guidelines

UKÄ's reviews are based on the Higher Education Act (1992:1434), the Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100), the Act (2019:504) on Responsibility for Good Research Practice and the Examination of Research Misconduct, the Government Communication Quality Assurance of Higher Education (2015/16:76), the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG),[2] and international guidelines for research.[3]

The Higher Education Act and the Higher Education Ordinance contain several provisions that are relevant to HEI quality assurance processes and their responsibility for ensuring high-quality education and research.

The ESG comprise standards and guidelines addressing both the internal quality assurance processes of an HEI and the external quality assurance of their educational activities carried out by quality assurance agencies. To comply with the ESG, both HEI and UKÄ must ensure that these international principles for quality assurance are applied.

For institutional reviews of HEI quality assurance processes for research, the Act (2019:504) on Responsibility for Good Research Practice and the Examination of Research Misconduct**,** together with the international guidelines The European Charter for Researchers and The Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers (the *Charter and Code*), are of particular importance.

Peer Review

The reviews are conducted through peer review by assessment panels. The assessment panel's statement forms the basis for UKÄ's decision.

The assessment panels consist of external, independent academic experts, student and doctoral student representatives, and representatives of working life.

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[2] *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*, 2015.
[3] *The European Charter for Researchers* and *The Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers*, European Commission, Directorate-General for Research, Human Resources and Mobility (Marie Curie Actions), 2005, EUR 21620.

UKÄ appoints the assessment panels through a nomination process in which HEIs, student and doctoral student unions through the Swedish National Union of Students (SFS), and organisations representing working life are invited to nominate panel members. As a quality assurance measure, the HEI is given the opportunity to comment on the proposed composition of the assessment panel before UKÄ makes its final appointment. This enables the institution to raise any objections relating to conflicts of interest or to identify any need for additional expertise.

Taken as a whole, each assessment panel must possess sufficient breadth and depth of expertise to make assessments against all of the assessment criteria included in the review. At least one panel member should currently work, or have previously worked, outside Sweden. The assessment panel must have a good understanding of both the Swedish higher education system and international higher education systems. Panel members must also have substantial knowledge of, and experience in, quality assurance processes relating to education and research at different levels.[4]

The panel members' assignment begins with training in UKÄ's review methodology and working procedures.

[4] Further information about assessors participating in UKÄ's reviews is available here https://www.uka.se/swedish-higher-education-authority/for-assessors/assessment-panels-and-external-experts

Assessment Criteria and Overall Assessment

Assessment Criteria

Reviews of HEI quality assurance processes are conducted against pre-established assessment criteria with eight criteria for education and eight for research. The assessment criteria are based on legislation and ordinances, as well as international principles and agreements relating to quality assurance.

Each assessment criterion is assessed as either fulfilled or not fulfilled.

The assessment criteria focus both on the design and function of the quality system and on the various areas that the institution's quality system is expected to address. Some criteria specify fundamental components that should be present in a quality system, while others are intended to capture the institution's capacity to monitor and enhance specific areas through the system.

For every assessment criterion, the assessment panel evaluates whether the HEI's quality assurance processes contribute, in a systematic and appropriate manner, to assuring and enhancing the quality of education or research, respectively. This includes determining whether the quality system incorporates a well-functioning continuous improvement cycle that enables the institution to identify areas requiring improvement and to ensure the quality of education and research. It also includes assessing whether there is a shared understanding throughout the institution of how quality assurance activities are organised and how the quality system is applied efficiently.

In reviews of quality assurance processes for education, both the student and doctoral student perspective and the working life perspective are of particular importance.[5] These perspectives may be relevant to several assessment criteria and are considered by the assessment panel wherever appropriate.

[5] Government Communication *2015/16:76 – Quality Assurance of Higher Education.*

Assessment criteria for reviewing HEI quality assurance processes for education

E1 Established procedure and quality culture
1. The HEI has an established and publicly available description of its quality system, which sets out the division of responsibilities, principles and concrete working methods for ensuring and developing quality in education. The quality assurance processes involve management, staff and students as well as external stakeholders when appropriate, and support the quality culture and strategic work at all levels of the organisation.

E2 Continuous monitoring
2. The HEI ensures that it regularly monitors and continuously collects, analyses and uses appropriate information with a bearing on the quality and relevance of education. The information is made available to relevant stakeholders and is used as a basis for development of education, strategic decisions and prioritization.

E3 Periodic reviews
3. The HEI's programmes undergo regular peer reviews to ensure that they are of high quality, are designed to provide students with the conditions necessary to achieve set goals, and meet the needs of students and society. The reviews lead to continuous improvement of the programmes. Results and actions are communicated in an appropriate manner.

E4 Establishment and discontinuation
4. The HEI ensures that there is a clear division of responsibilities, and appropriate processes and procedures for the establishment and discontinuation of courses and study programmes.

E5 Student support, learning resources and infrastructure
5. The HEI works systematically to ensure that infrastructure, student support and learning resources are appropriate for students' and doctoral students' learning.

E6 Competence supply and professional development
6. The HEI works systematically to ensure a long-term competence supply to satisfy the needs of education and enable renewal. The HEI works systematically to create favourable conditions for the professional development of teaching staff.

E7 Connection between research and education
7. The HEI works systematically to ensure that there is a close link between research and education in the organisation.

E8 Student-centred learning
8. The HEI works systematically to ensure student-centred learning

Assessment criteria for reviewing HEI quality assurance processes for research

R1 Established procedure and quality culture
1. The HEI has an established and publicly available description of the HEI's quality system, which sets out the division of responsibilities, principles and concrete working methods for ensuring and developing quality in research. The quality assurance processes involve management and staff as well as external stakeholders when appropriate, and support the quality culture and strategic work at all levels of the organisation.

R2 Continuous monitoring
2. The HEI ensures that it regularly collects, analyses and uses appropriate information with a bearing on the quality and relevance of research. The information is made available to relevant stakeholders and is used as a basis for research development, strategic decisions and prioritisation.

R3 Periodic reviews
3. The HEI ensures that its research or research environments undergo regular peer reviews from a national and international perspective. The reviews are conducted in a way that is appropriate for the HEI. The HEI systematically captures and addresses the recommendations arising from such reviews.

R4 Research development and renewal
4. The HEI works systematically to create favourable conditions for the development and renewal of research and research environments.

R5 Support activities and research infrastructure
5. The HEI works systematically to provide fit for purpose support for research and has appropriate processes for the prioritisation and long-term renewal of research infrastructures.

R6 Competence supply, professional development and career support
6. The HEI works systematically to ensure a long-term competence supply for the development and renewal of research. The HEI also works systematically to create good conditions for professional development and offers well-functioning career support for researchers at all stages of their careers, regardless of the form of employment.

R7 Gender equality
7. The HEI works systematically to promote gender equality in the preconditions for research.

R8 Good research practice
8. The HEI works systematically to promote good research practice and to prevent and address misconduct in research.

Overall Assessment

The overall assessment of an HEI's quality assurance processes is expressed on a two-point scale: *Approved quality assurance processes* and *Quality assurance processes under review*.[6]

The overall assessment *Approved Quality assurance processes* means that the HEI's quality assurance processes contribute, in a systematic and appropriate manner, to assuring and enhancing the quality of both education and research. The institution's quality system includes a

[6] UKÄ has introduced a new judgement scale for institutional reviews. Under the revised scale, assessment panels may also award a Special Commendation for particularly successful quality enhancement initiatives. See Strengthening Quality and Promoting Excellence in Swedish Higher Education: Proposals for the Development of the National Quality Assurance System, UKÄ 2024, Ref. No. 111-00481-23.

continuous improvement cycle that enables it to identify deficiencies and areas requiring development, address them effectively, and revise processes and procedures whenever necessary.

In its overall assessment, the assessment panel evaluates how well the HEI's quality assurance processes function in practice. The overall judgement explains, on the basis of the assessment of all assessment criteria, which factors contribute to the proposed overall judgement and whether the panel has confidence or lacks confidence—in the quality system as a whole.

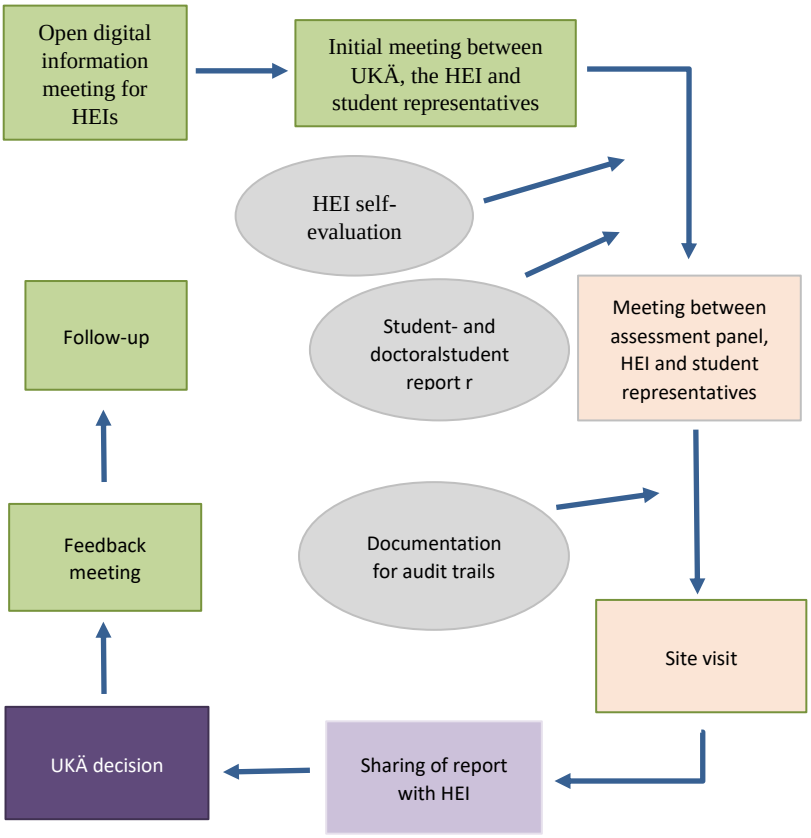
Special Commendation

The assessment panel may also award the HEI a Special Commendation in its statement. The purpose of a Special Commendation is to highlight particularly successful systematic quality enhancement initiatives and working methods that demonstrate a well-functioning continuous improvement cycle. By recognising such examples of good practice, other HEIs can be inspired to further develop their own quality assurance processes and working methods.

The Review Process

Reviews of an HEI's quality assurance processes for education and research are conducted simultaneously.[7]

Figure 1 Main Stages of the Review Process



Background information about the HEI

Before each review, UKÄ compiles background information about the higher education institution. This information includes, for example: results of UKÄ's previous reviews[8], statistics on student completion and labour market establishment, information concerning the HEI's finances, staffing, and scholarly or artistic output.

The background information does not constitute assessment material. However, the assessment panel may use it as a basis for selecting audit

[7] UKÄ informs the HEIs scheduled for review during the following three years of, among other things, the deadline for submitting the self-evaluation and whether the review will cover both education and research or education only.
[8] This includes the decision and assessment report from the previous institutional review, the follow-up review, and the results of any programme evaluations, appraisals of applications for degree-awarding powers, and thematic evaluations.

trails and preparing questions for the site visit. The material is made available to the HEI in connection with the review.

Assessment Material

The assessment material for each review consists of:

- a self-evaluation submitted by the HEI, including appendices
- a student and doctoral student report prepared by the relevant student and doctoral student unions[9]
- documentation relating to selected audit trails
- information obtained through the assessment panel's meetings and interviews with the HEI.

All assessment material is taken into account in the review.

UKÄ informs the HEI and the relevant student and doctoral student unions well in advance regarding when and how the assessment material is to be submitted.

The HEI's Self-Evaluation and Appendices

The self-evaluation is a tool that provides those involved at the HEI with an opportunity to work together to make the institution's quality assurance processes more visible, deepen knowledge about them, and contribute to their further development.

The HEI prepares a self-evaluation document that covers both education and research, demonstrates how it fulfils all assessment criteria and evaluates how effectively its quality assurance processes function.

The self-evaluation may be structured in whatever way the HEI considers appropriate. However, it should explicitly address all assessment criteria and include the following:

1. A description of the quality system, including the objectives and strategies governing the quality assurance processes.
2. A description of how the quality assurance processes have developed since the previous review conducted by UKÄ

[9] The student and doctoral student report is not mandatory, but it may constitute an important source of information for the assessment panel.

3. An analysis of the strengths and challenges that the HEI considers to arise from the chosen design of its quality system and quality assurance processes.

4. An account of the principal procedures and processes through which the HEI ensures that its activities maintain high quality and that the quality assurance processes function as intended.

5. Examples of how the HEI has addressed deficiencies or areas for development identified through its quality system.

6. A description of the processes through which the student and doctoral student perspective and the working life perspective are incorporated, together with an explanation of the assessment criteria to which they relate.

7. Where appropriate, references to written documentation relating to the procedures and processes described, or documentation that illustrates and supports the analysis.

Appendices to the self-evaluation:

- the formally adopted description of the HEI's quality system
- an organisational chart
- the institution's rules of procedure and delegation of authority
- a compilation[10] of the principal governing documents relating to the quality assurance processes for education and research.

The extent to which education and research are described jointly or separately should reflect how the HEI has organised its quality assurance processes. It is important that the assessment panel can clearly identify which descriptions relate to education, research or both. The HEI is encouraged to refer to supporting documents throughout the text. However, the self-evaluation should be understandable without requiring the reader to consult those documents.

The self-evaluation may comprise no more than 80 pages. The recommended formatting is Times New Roman, 12-point font.

Student and Doctoral Student Report

As part of reviews of HEI quality assurance processes, UKÄ offers student unions, together with the doctoral student organisation at the HEI, the opportunity to submit a written report to UKÄ, referred to as the *student and doctoral student report*.

[10] See the template *Cover Sheet for Appendices to the Self-Evaluation* available on www.uka.se

The purpose of the report is to provide student and doctoral student representatives with an opportunity to present their views on, and describe their experiences of, the HEI's quality assurance processes.

Quality assurance is a shared responsibility of the HEI's staff, students and doctoral students. It is therefore important that the preparation of the student and doctoral student submission does not affect students' or doctoral students' opportunities to participate in the HEI's work on the self-evaluation. (See also *Information Meeting on Preparing the Student and Doctoral Student Report, p. 17.*)

Documentation for audit trails

In addition to the descriptions and evidence provided in the HEI's self-evaluation, documentation relating to audit trails forms part of the overall assessment material.

The purpose of the audit trails is to provide insight into how the HEI's quality assurance processes function in practice by examining selected aspects of the institution's quality assurance work in greater depth.

The design and emphasis of the focus areas may vary but are always linked to the assessment criteria.

The documentation requested for each audit trail should consist exclusively of material that already exists at the HEI. Examples of documentation that may be requested include the HEI's own evaluations, follow-up reports and development plans relating to a particular aspect of the quality assurance processes; and documentation from advisory or decision-making bodies.

Information from Meetings and Interviews

The assessment panel meets representatives of the HEI and representatives of students and doctoral students on two occasions during the review.

The information obtained during the panel's initial meeting with the HEI and during the interviews conducted at the site visit forms part of the assessment material on which the review is based.

Main Stages of the Review Process

Open Digital Information Meetings

Each year UKÄ organises open digital information meetings for HEIs and student and doctoral student unions. Each HEI and student or doctoral student union may decide when to participate and which

representatives should attend. Before an HEI begins its review process, it is expected to have participated in one of these meetings. The purpose of the information meeting is to provide general information about the structure and content of the review process. UKÄ does not provide detailed information about the timetable for individual reviews or answer institution-specific questions during these meetings.

Information Meeting on Preparing the Student and Doctoral Student Report

Before the review, UKÄ invites representatives from all student and doctoral student unions at the HEIs scheduled for review to an information meeting concerning the student and doctoral student report. UKÄ explains the purpose and role of the report in the review process and shares practical advice and experiences from previous reviews to support the student and doctoral student organisations in preparing their report.

Initial Meeting with UKÄ

At the start of the review, UKÄ's project team meets representatives of the HEI together with representatives of the student and doctoral student unions. During the meeting, UKÄ presents the timetable for the individual review and explains practical arrangements. Participants also have the opportunity to ask questions about the review.

Initial Meeting with the Assessment Panel

After the HEI has submitted its self-evaluation, UKÄ convenes an initial meeting between the assessment panel and the HEI. Representatives of the student and doctoral student unions are also invited. During the meeting, the HEI presents its quality system together with its specific objectives, organisational context and operating conditions.

The purpose of the meeting is to provide the assessment panel with an initial overall understanding of the HEI before the detailed review begins.

Documentation to be Submitted for Audit Trails

During the review process, the assessment panel selects audit trails relating to both education and research (See also Documentation for Audit Trails, p. 17.)

The UKÄ project manager responsible for the review informs the HEI well in advance of the panel's selected audit trails. UKÄ maintains a dialogue with the HEI concerning which documentation is to be submitted and the deadlines for submission.

Site Visit Interviews

The assessment panel conducts a site visit to the HEI. During the visit, the panel interviews representatives from different parts of the institution, including, for example, members of the institutional leadership, academic staff, researchers, professional and administrative staff, students and doctoral students.

The purpose of the interviews is to supplement the written assessment material. The interviews enable the assessment panel to verify the information already provided and to gain a deeper understanding of the HEI's quality assurance processes. They also provide an opportunity for representatives of the institution, students and doctoral students to present additional information that may clarify or complement the self-evaluation and other assessment material. (See also Information from Meetings and Interviews, p. 17.)

Before the interviews, UKÄ consults both the HEI and the student and doctoral student unions regarding a proposed interview schedule and the categories of participants the assessment panel wishes to meet. The HEI and the student and doctoral student unions propose individuals who will participate in each interview session. UKÄ gives final approval to the site visit schedule.

Students and doctoral students participating in the interviews should, as a general rule, be appointed by a student or doctoral student organisation affiliated with a recognised student union or holding official student union status at the HEI.

UKÄ provides the designated contact persons at both the HEI and the student and doctoral student unions with all necessary practical information concerning the site visit. Those contact persons are then responsible for ensuring that all interview participants receive the relevant information.

Where necessary, the assessment panel may request additional material during the later stages of the review. Such supplementary material may include additional documents written responses to questions or supplementary interviews.

Report and decision

The assessment panel prepares two reports one concerning the review of the HEI's quality assurance processes for education and one concerning the review of the HEI's quality assurance processes for research.

The assessment panel's reports specify whether each assessment criterion is fulfilled or not fulfilled. The panel's assessments and reasoning must be presented clearly and transparently so that it is evident which aspects the panel considers to fulfil the assessment criteria and which do not. To

contribute to the HEI's quality enhancement, the assessment panel should highlight not only areas for development, but also strengths and examples of good practice.

Before UKÄ makes its decision, the assessment panel's reports are shared with the HEI. The HEI is given three weeks to review the reports. The purpose of this consultation process is to give the HEI the opportunity to identify any factual inaccuracies in the reports. The assessment panel considers the HEI's comments and revises the reports where it considers this appropriate.

UKÄ then makes separate decisions regarding the HEI's quality assurance processes for education and for research, based on the two separate reports prepared by the assessment panel. UKÄ decides whether the HEI's quality assurance processes are approved or not approved.

UKÄ's decision specifies any assessment criteria that have not been fulfilled, the timing of the follow-up review, and the procedures that apply where the HEI's quality assurance processes have been judged not approved.

Feedback Meeting

Following completion of the review, UKÄ invites the HEI, the student and doctoral student unions, and representatives of the assessment panel to a meeting for mutual feedback on the review process.

Follow-up

UKÄ conducts a follow-up of all institutional reviews, regardless of the overall judgement, approximately three years after the decision has been made.

The follow-up focuses on the HEI's quality enhancement and does not result in a new overall judgement. To change the overall judgement from Quality Assurance Processes Under Review to Approved Quality Assurance Processes, a new institutional review is required.[11]

[11] Follow-up reviews are currently under further development, particularly the concrete measures for HEIs who receive the judgement *Quality assurance processes under review*. The results of this development will be presented during 2026

Reconsideration and Complaints

Reconsideration

HEIs may request that UKÄ reconsider one of its decisions.[12] A special expert panel, appointed by UKÄ, prepares reconsideration cases. The purpose of the expert panel's review is to determine whether deficiencies occurred during the original review process. The expert panel does not reassess the substantive issues of the review. Instead, it considers only whether the review or evaluation process conducted by UKÄ was carried out appropriately.

Complaints

UKÄ strives for openness and dialogue in quality assurance of HEI operations. Should dissatisfaction surrounding the evaluation process arise, HEIs have the opportunity to present complaints. The complaints may concern the process for UKÄs evaluations or the individuals conducting the evaluation. Complaints are raised by the vice-chancellor of the HEI in question. [13]

[12] See *Guidelines for Reconsideration of Decisions within the Quality Assurance of Higher Education, Ref. No. 411-00406-18.*
[13] See *Guidelines for Handling Complaints Concerning UKÄ's Quality Assurance of the Activities of Universities and University Colleges*, Ref. No. 00502-24.

The Swedish Higher Education Authority (Universitetskanslersämbetet – UKÄ) is to contribute to strengthening Swedish higher education and Sweden as a knowledge society. We review the quality of higher education programmes; we analyse and follow-up trends within higher education and we monitor the rights of students.

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