

Choice of Assessment Methods within a Module: Students' Experiences and Staff Recommendations for practice.

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Introduction

Encouraging students to take some responsibility in how and what they learn is in keeping with good practices in student-centred learning¹. By extending this decision-making to 'choice of assessment' methods it allows students to take some control of their learning and to play to their strengths. This is also an example of an inclusive assessment approach. This inclusive approach can be very beneficial for staff and students when there are students with diverse learning needs within a particular module. This diversity may be known to module co-ordinators such as: as mature students; international students; students with different prior learning; students with disabilities. Alternatively the diversity may be less obvious, such as: anxious students; students with different learning styles; students with poor time-management skills; and students who have personal, work or other demands on the flexibility of their time commitment. An inclusive approach to assessment can address this issue of diversity, is in keeping with best practice in assessment^{2,3,4,5} and links with the widening participation component in UCD's Education and Student Experience Strategy.⁶

In using this approach, however, care must be taken to ensure equity in assessment methods and it is important that the both assessments have coherent alignment between learning outcomes, assessment criteria, marking procedures, and feedback mechanisms^{2,4}.

This project, therefore, aimed to explore both a) the outcomes of and b) the experiences of the staff and students on, the implementation of student assessment choice in a variety of modules across UCD (Inclusive Assessment Project). Three modules were delivered in 2009/2010 and a further eight are to be implemented in 2010/2011 (see Appendix 1). The project is being carried out by UCD Teaching and Learning, under the Registrar's Office, and is supported by HEA Training of Trainers funding.

The Planning Process:

Deciding on the choice of assessment methods was the first step for module co-ordinators, supported by UCD Teaching and Learning. All staff involved complete a '*Student Information Template*' designed, by the project co-ordinator, for the purpose of this project. This ensured that staff carefully considered the equity and diversity issues of the assessments and that students received adequate information to make an early informed choice (see appendix 2). The next step involved the implementation and evaluation (initially using a student questionnaire and staff interviews) of three modules across UCD in January 2010 (see Appendix 1: Modules 1,2,3). A further roll out of similar approaches is planned for 2010/2011 (See Appendix 1). Based on the literature, a student questionnaire was designed for the project.

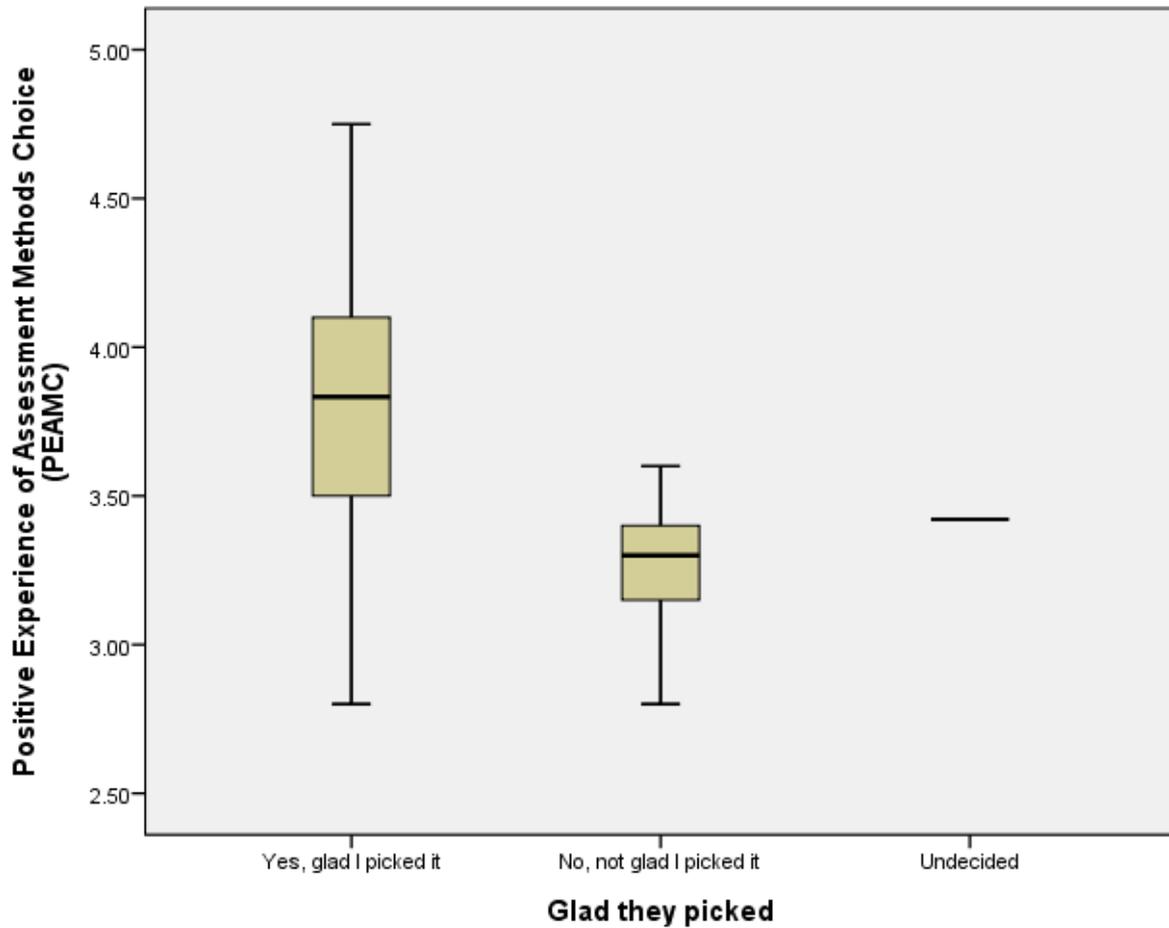
In the questionnaire, questions were designed to address students' views on: reasons for choice of assessment; their satisfaction with their choices. In addition, a 20 statement scale was designed to measure students' view of the assessment methods choice. This included subscales that addressed: level of anxiety in choosing; equity between assessment methods; the diversity of choice; sense of empowerment in choosing; and support given by staff in the process. The total score is described as a scale that measures the '*Positive Experience of Assessment Methods Choice*' (PEAMC). Factor analysis is currently being performed on this scale.

The Interim Results

The student questionnaire was handed out at the end of the teaching term to the three modules using this approach in Semester 2, 2009/2010 (see Appendix 1). 97 students returned the questionnaire. 27 were male (27%) and 67 were female (68%). 17 identified themselves as mature students (17%).

The majority of student (82%) were glad with their choice and those students not satisfied (9%) with their choice noted that the workload on the assessment should be slightly reduced for that assessment. Those that were glad they picked the scale had a higher score on the ‘*Positive Experience of Assessment Methods Choice*’ (PEAMC) scale (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Box-plot of Satisfaction with Assessment Method and Score on the PEAMC

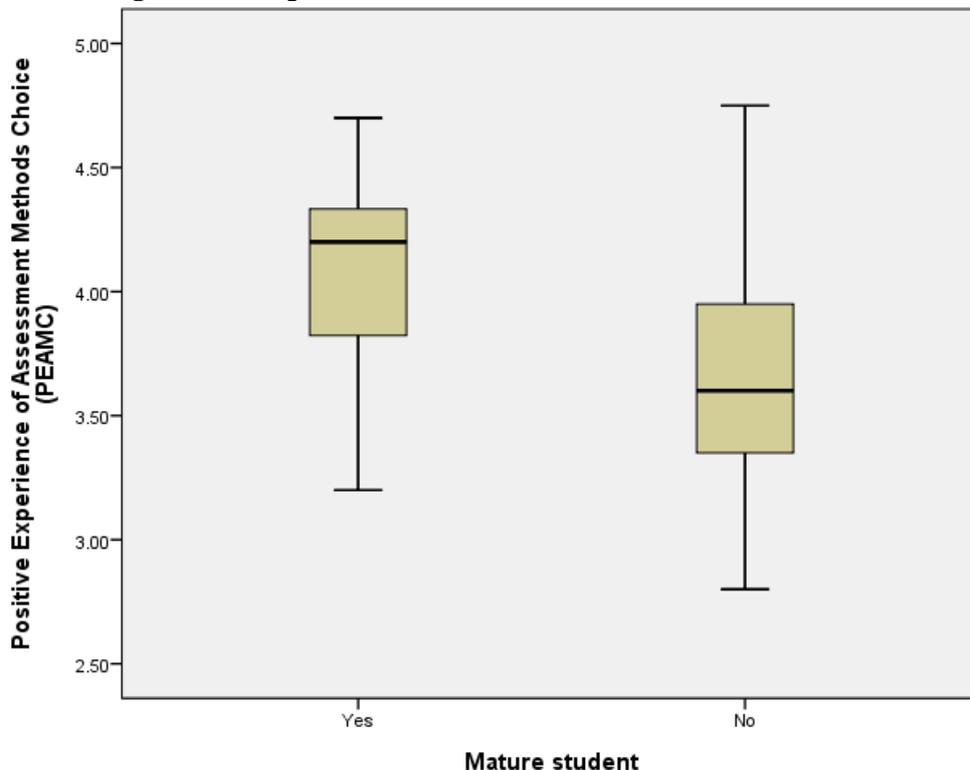


The mature students in the sample group appeared to be more positive towards the experience of assessment methods choice (see Table 1 and Figure 2)

Table 1: Mature and Non-Mature Students scores on the PEAMC

	Mature Students (N=17)		Non-Mature Students (N=80)	
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D
Positive Experience of Assessment Methods Choice (PEAMC)	4.08	.42	3.66	.44

Figure 2: Box-plot of Scores for mature and other students on PEAMC scale.



Reasons for choice of assessment:

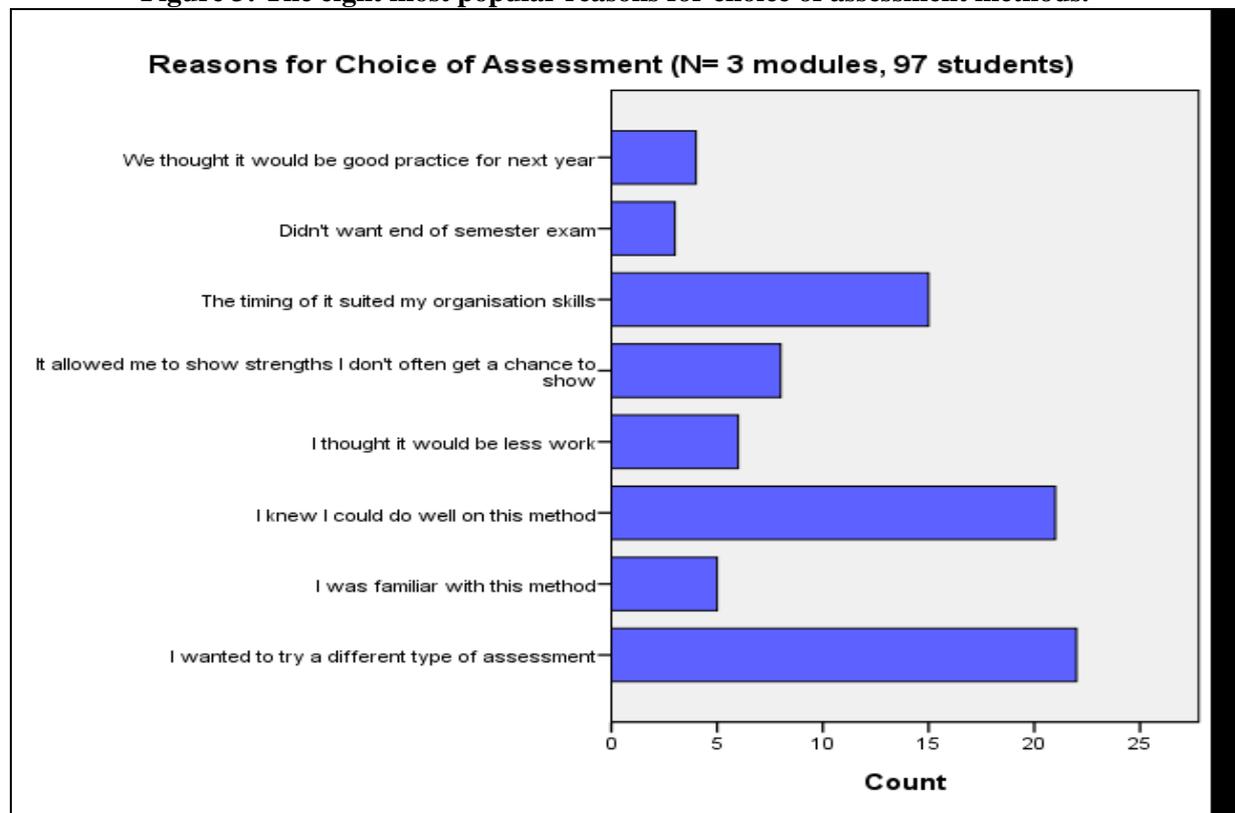
It was interesting that the most frequently chosen reason why students chose an assessment method was that they 'wanted to try a different types of method'. This appeared to demonstrate a willingness on their part to undertake something a little different (See Figure 3). However, many also chose assessments that they knew 'they could do well on'. Some of the modules had a choice of more continuous versus end of semester focus and these accounted for the frequently of students noting that 'the timing of it suited my organisational skills', for example in the open-ended comments one student noted that:

'The choice was good to have, as some people don't do well with just one final exam and are better suited to continuous assessment (S20).

In addition, some students used the choice of continuous versus end of semester assessment to plan their overall approach to study in the semester, particularly in relation to the assessment of other parallel modules:

'..it allowed me to look at my other modules and workload and decide if I had more time during the term or at the end of the term, in which to do work for this module'. (S6)

Figure 3: The eight most popular reasons for choice of assessment methods.



Perception of Empowerment:

A significant aspect of this project was the concept of empowering students in having some control over how they were assessed. As in all the themes in the questionnaire, there were four statements that addressed this theme (see Table 2). The first statement in this table had the strongest level of agreement of all statements in the questionnaire with 93% either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement: *'I appreciated being given a choice of assessment methods'*. (Median= Strongly Agree). The students agreed that they had both ownership and had felt empowered by being given this choice. They were all given a choice of two assessments to choose one, however as noted in the last statement in Table 2, they didn't seem to want to have any additional control than the existing level of control given in these modules.

Table 1: Empowerment Theme: Median of Questionnaire Statements (N= 3 module, 97 students)	
I appreciated being given a choice of assessment methods	Strongly Agree
I felt some ownership of the learning experience in this module	Agree
I felt empowered by having some choice of assessment	Agree
I felt I had should have had <u>more</u> control of my assessment in this module	Disagree

The reduced or increased level of anxiety in choice:

UCD students have some choices around what modules they choose, with the choice of elective modules built into the modularisation system. However, students are less familiar with having assessment choices within a module and this has potential to be stressful for students. To explore this further, four statements were also asked around this theme of anxiety (see Table 3). It appeared from

the mixture of positively and negatively worded statements that the students in these modules appeared not to have been stressed by the process of choosing assessment methods. In fact, it appeared to have reduces the stress they normally experienced with assessment, for example one student mentioned that: *'It was less pressure than a final exam with the same amount of learning'*.

Table 3: Anxiety Theme: Median of Questionnaire Statements (N= 3 module, 97 students)	
Having a choice of assessment reduced some of the stress I normally experience with assessment	Agree
I found it stressful to have to chose an assessment method	Disagree
I was confident in my choice of assessment method	Agree
It was a relief to experience some choice in my learning.	Agree

Opportunity for assessment of diverse learning styles/approaches

The concept of inclusive assessment is that all students can play to their strengths and not solely those that may have been identified as needing some special accommodations, such as, students with disabilities. However, to what extent did these modules design assessments that allowed students to play to their strengths? The median scores on the questionnaire show that the students agreed that the modules had attempted to accommodate their learning styles and had allowed them to play to their strengths (Table 4). The assessments also allowed them opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge. However, similar to the issue of empowerment, there was a limit to their comfort with increased diversity and the students were undecided about whether there should be more diversity in the module that they already experience. It may be that a choice of approximately two assessments is adequate and more choices are not necessarily beneficial. In the students open-ended comments, the diversity of needs was apparent in students' preference. For example, their mixed preferences for the end of semester examination:

-Personally, I prefer end of semester exams.(S35)

-Don't do well under exam circumstances.(S15)

In addition, students had some opportunity to play to their strengths in relation to particular skills:

-I struggle with calculations sometimes, so thought the essay would give me a better chance to show other strengths (S6)

Although, the data for 'Special accommodations' has not yet been analysed in this project, one module co-ordinator noted that one of her students, who usually requires special accommodation, did not require it within the module's assessment choices as it used a more visual than verbal format. One of the other module co-ordinators, highlight that one of the students who requires 'special accommodation' for an examination format chose the continuous assessment option and reduced the need for organisation of this 'special accommodation'. This student also remarked on the benefits of not having to have this organised for her. For different reasons, another student, also in this module, chose the end of semester examination option as the continuous assessment option did not suit her home life arrangements. Therefore, both of the assessment methods in this module allowed students to play to their strengths for different reasons.

Table 4: Diversity Theme: Median of Questionnaire Statements (N= 3 module, 97 students)	
The module attempted to accommodate my learning style	Agree
Having a choice of assessment method allowed me to play to my strengths	Agree
I would like to have had a wider variety of choices of assessment methods in this module	Undecided
I felt that the assessment method allowed me opportunity to demonstrate my knowledge in this module.	Agree

The equity of assessment choices:

One barrier to assessment choice, elaborated on in the literature, is the effort required to ensure that assessments are relatively equal for students^{2,4}. In an attempt to address this, efforts such as the use of the ‘Student Information Template’ (appendix 2) were built into the module design. However, it was important to seek students’ views on the success of this. It appeared that the explanation of both the assessment methods was equally communicated to the students (Table 5: disagree with negatively worded statement). The level of workload and amount of feedback was equitable between the assessment methods. However, there was less agreement with equity of examples available for both assessment types (Table 4: Final statement). Less familiar assessments in some modules, such as, poster presentations, problem-solving assignments, or seen examinations, may need to have more examples developed for students to be able to make informed choices. However, these three modules now have the current set of student examples to use for the following year.

Table 5: Equity Theme: Median of Questionnaire Statements (N= 3 module, 97 students)	
The assessment method I chose was not explained as well as the other assessment method	Disagree
Over the course of the semester, the workload for my choice appeared similar to the other assessment method(s)	Agree
I was satisfied with the level of feedback I had compared to the feedback in other assessment method	Agree
I was satisfied with the examples available of my assessment method compared to the examples of the other assessment method	Undecided

The support given:

As note earlier, as students can be quite unfamiliar with the process of choosing an assessment method and may also be unfamiliar with some of the assessment choices, it was important to build in staff and student peer support into the process (Table 6). The students appeared to be very satisfied with the supports from both the staff and their peers (other students) in both choosing and throughout the process. One of the module co-ordinators interviewed who was very supportive of this approach, elaborated on the importance of this support to help students’ choose. She noted that staff should consider this approach carefully and it should be ‘rolled out cautiously’ (StF1).

Table 6: Support Theme: Median of Questionnaire Statements (N= 3 module, 97 students)	
I felt I was given sufficient information required to choose the assessment method.	Agree
I felt I was given the support required while attempting this assessment method	Agree
The staff could have been more supportive in the helping me choose my assessment method(s).	Disagree
It helped to talk to the other students about the assessment choice	Agree

Conclusion:

The initial descriptive analysis of the data from this study demonstrates that students across three diverse modules in UCD were very receptive to the idea of choices of assessment methods. They felt that they had been empowered by this process and that having some control in relation to their assessment reduced their anxieties and allowed them to play to their strengths. Significant efforts, by the module co-coordinators and UCD Teaching and Learning, were done on the early module design decisions, such as, developing a template to ensure equity across the assessments. This seems to have been successful as the students on these modules appeared to have perceived that there was, in

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general, equity between the assessment choices and the majority were glad with their assessment choice. This preparation work may well be essential to the success of this approach. Those considering implementing assessment choices, therefore, should strongly consider using the 'Student Information Template' (or an equivalent process) in both the design and communication of the module's assessment methods to the students.

Further, inferential statistics will be completed as the other modules are rolled out next semester. In addition, factor analysis of the questionnaire will be performed to develop a standardised tool to assess students 'Positive Experience of Assessment Methods Choice (PEAMC)'. The differences in grades between the assessment methods and, where appropriate, the requirements for special accommodations in these modules will be also be examined.

For further details on this project, or if you are interested in developing assessment choices in your modules, please contact Dr Geraldine O'Neill (7162839, geraldine.m.oneill@ucd.)

Note:

The results from these first three modules are being presented at the AISHE Conference, August 2010. <http://ocs.aishe.org/aishe/index.php/international/2010/paper/view/155>).

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Appendix 1: The Modules: Choice of Assessment Methods (Modules 1,2,3 basis of Interim Report)

Modules & Schools	Weighting of choice	Method Choice		Group v Individual Choice	Purpose Choice	Timing Choice	E-learning	Level/Numbers
	Weighting of assessment choice element in the full module	Individual assignment method versus individual with different format	Group assignment method versus Group with different format	Group (with or without some individual aspect) assignment versus Individual with different format	Formative assessment versus opportunity for summative assessment	More continuous versus end of semester choice	On-line versus not on-line	
1. Development & Advanced Pharmacology (09/10') Kathy O'Boyle.	20%		Group poster v. Group oral					Level : 3 Students: 70
2.Environmental Biology ('09/10) Evelyn Doyle & Nicholas Clipson	50%	Problem-solving v. Seen exam				More continuous versus end of semester		Level : 3 Students: n=60
3. Human Rights Law and Equality (09/10) Judy Walsh	100%			Group project/individual v essay		More continuous versus end of semester		Level : 4 Students: 30
4. Computer: Data Mining ('10/'11) Tahar Kechadi	20%	Tutorial Assignment v Project				More continuous versus end of semester		Level 4 (5 credit)
5. Computer: Data Mining 2 ('10/'11) Tahar Kechadi	20%	Tutorial Assignment v Project				More continuous versus end of semester		Level (7.5)
6. Introduction to Computer Forensics('10/'11) Tahar Kechadi								
7 . The making of early modern France ('10/'11) Jean-Michel Picard	100%	Essay v Audio Visual	Group Poster v Group Oral					Level : 1 Students: 40
8.. Forensic Radiography ('10/'11) Jonathan McNulty	50%	Wiki v Applied Essay				More continuous versus end of semester	On-line versus not on-line	Level : 4 Students: 24
9. Research Elective ('10/'11) Amanda McCann								
10. Development & Advanced Pharmacology (('10/'11) Kathy O'Boyle	20%		Group poster/ Group oral					Level : 3 Students: 70
11.Environmental Biology ('('10/'11) Evelyn Doyle & Nicholas Clipson	50%	Problem-solving/ Seen exam				More continuous versus end of semester		Level : 3 Students: n=60
12. Human Rights Law and Equality ('10/'11) Judy Walsh	100%			Group reflection/essay &				Level : 4 Students: 30

Appendix 2: Student Information Template.

Student Information Template:																						
Description of Choice of Your Assessment Methods and Equity of efforts, standards and support																						
Module:																						
Assessment Choice	Assessment :	Assessment :																				
Weighting toward Module Assessment																						
Details of assessment																						
Why this might suit you (i.e. more visual, more continuous, different style of writing, apply to practice...)																						
Learning Outcomes to be assessed																						
Assessment Criteria used																						
Marking Procedures (examiners, etc...)																						
Teaching and Learning activities to support the assessments																						
Feedback Mechanisms (how made equitable)																						
Student Workload expectations	<table border="1"> <tr><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Total</td><td>Hours*</td></tr> </table> <p>*Should be relatively equal, but may be different in breakdown</p>									Total	Hours*	<table border="1"> <tr><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Total</td><td>Hours*</td></tr> </table> <p>*Should be relatively equal, but may be different in breakdown</p>									Total	Hours*
Total	Hours*																					
Total	Hours*																					
Examples of assessment method available to student beforehand (if unfamiliar)																						

Any additional comments for students on this choice or other relevant information: (for example, other assessments and their weighting to module..)

Date for decision and sign-off on assessment choice aspect:

For further queries on the assessment choices, please contact

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