Reflections on Policies and Practices of Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria: Towards a Renewed Invigoration

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the policy and practice of Open and Distance learning in Nigeria with a view to identifying the areas that need a renewed invigoration. Concepts related to Open and Distance Learning and the Evolution of Distance Education Practice in Nigeria are discussed. The policy formulations of Distance Education institutions in Nigeria in relation to the major components of Distance Education and the problems plaguing the effective implementation of distance education programmes are examined. The need for a renewed invigoration of Open and Distance Learning practices in Nigeria especially in the development of comprehensive and coherent strategic vision to guide policy development on student support services, modern technology for information processing and instruction, instructional facilities to match students enrolment, quality assurance system, benchmark for accreditation of Open and Distance Learning programmes are recommended.

Keywords: Open and distance learning, policy, renewed invigoration, practice, implementation

Abstrak

Kajian ini melihat polisi dan amalan pendidikan secara jarak jauh dan terbuka di Nigeria dengan tujuan untuk mengenal pasti bahagian yang memerlukan pembaharuan. Kajian ini membincangkan konsep-konsep berkaitan pendidikan jarak jauh dan terbuka serta evolusi amalan pendidikan jarak jauh di Nigeria. Pembentukan dasar berkaitan komponen-komponen utama pendidikan jarak jauh oleh institusi-institusi pendidikan jarak jauh di Nigeria serta cabaran yang menghalang keberkesanan implementasi program pendidikan jarak jauh turut dibincangkan. Wujud keperluan untuk pembaharuan dalam amalan pendidikan secara jarak jauh dan terbuka terutamanya dalam merangka visi strategik yang komprehensif dan jitu sebagai panduan untuk pembentukan dasar berkaitan perkhidmatan sokongan pelajar,

teknologi moden untuk pemprosesan maklumat dan kaedah pengajaran, kemudahan pembelajaran berpadanan dengan kemasukan pelajar, sistem jaminan kualiti, tanda aras untuk proses akreditasi program pendidikan jarak jauh dan terbuka.

Kata kunci: Pembelajaran terbuka dan jarak jauh, polisi, rangsangan baru, amalan, implementasi

Introduction

The increasing international interest in Open and Distance Learning and the subsequent expansion of the respective institutions and programmes is the most remarkable development in the field of education and training in recent years (Dias, 1997). There is no doubt that Open and Distance Learning has established itself as an integral part of the educational delivery systems in Nigeria with the establishment of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in 2002. Invariably, the increasing recognition of the place and role of Open and Distance Learning was clearly specified in the 2004 revised Nigeria's National Policy on Education when it asserted that the goals of Distance Education are to:

1. Provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied.
2. Meet special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their workplace.
3. Encourage internationalization, especially of tertiary education curricula.
4. Ameliorate the effect of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institutions by utilizing Nigerian experts as teachers regardless of their locations or places of work (p. 45).

Rumble (1989) and Ljosa (1992) perceived the potential roles of Open and Distance Learning in national systems of education as:

1. Balancing inequalities between age groups,
2. Extending geographical access to education,
3. Dealing with educational campaigns and regular education for large audiences,
4. Providing speedy and efficient training for key target groups,

5. Providing education for otherwise neglected populations,
6. Expanding the capacity for education in new and multidisciplinary subject areas,
7. Offering the combination of education with work and family life,
8. Developing multiple competencies through recurrent and continuing education,
9. Enhancing the international dimension of educational experience, and
10. Improving the quality of existing education services.

Despite these multi-dimensional roles of open and distance learning, it has, for most of its history, had to contend with suspicion among educational authorities about low quality standards or even unethical practices. Open and Distance learning system is often criticized for placing too much emphasis on widening access than assuring quality. The importance of quality assurance is now universally perceived as a key issue that needs to be addressed by open and distance learning institutions worldwide. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to reflect on the policy and practices of Open-Distance Learning in Nigeria with a view to exploring the issues that need renewed invigoration if ODL is to assume the status of a standard and alternative component of the educational system in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification: Open learning, Distance Education, and Open and Distance Learning

There appears to be no universally agreed definition of the term open learning. To some 'open' simply means open entry and access to learning opportunities and the removal of barriers to learning opportunities. While to others, it includes aspects of methods and organizations such that open learning may, sometimes, be substituted by flexible learning. Jeffries, et al. (1990) defined open learning as: "any form of learning in which the provider (e.g., an institution or organization)…enables individual learners to exercise choice over any one or more of a number of aspects of learning". Typically, this involves helping learners take responsibility for aspects such as what they learn, how they learn, where they learn, how quickly they learn, who to turn to for help and when and where to have their learning assessed.

Distance education, in most cases, shares the concern of openness and flexibility. However, most definitions on distance education portray the possibility of communication between participants in the learning process across time and/or space, particularly brought about by new and some olds technologies. Perraton (1993) described distance education as "an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learners." Similarly, Holmberg (1990) defined distance education as:

> The various form of teaching and learning at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or in the same premise, but which nevertheless benefit from the planning, guidance, and tuition (i.e., tutoring, teaching) of the staff of the tutorial organization. Its main characteristics are that it relies on non-contiguous, i.e., mediated communication.

From this definition, one can deduce that distance education, in line with Kaufman, Watkins and Guerra (2000), means the delivery of useful learning opportunities at convenient place and time for learners, irrespective of the institution providing the learning opportunity. It is instructive to state that in Nigeria, distance education is interchangeably used as distance learning or distance teaching.

Distance Learning

In line with most definitions on distance education, distance learning is defined by Greenberg (1998) as a planned teaching/learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learners' interaction and certification of learning. Teaster and Blieszner (1999) perceived "distance learning has been applied to many instructional methods: however, its primary distinction is that the teacher and the learners are separated in space and possibly time." Keegan (1996) provided the most comprehensive definition of distance learning when he asserted that "this form of learning results from the technological separation of teacher and learners which frees the student from the necessity of travelling to a fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet a fixed person, in order to be trained." Irrespective of the nomenclature, these forms of learning involve the use of a range of media, such as print, written correspondence, audio, video, computer-based-

media and networks as well as multimedia for both presentation of information and for communication between learners. Open and distance learning is often used when one wants to address a whole range of related forms of teaching and learning, without concentrating too much on exact delineation and definition. It stresses openness concerning access, organization and methods, flexibility in delivery and communication patterns, and the use of various technologies in support of learning.

The Evolution of Distance Education Practice in Nigeria

Distance Education (then called correspondence education) was brought into Nigeria by the colonialists at part of the packages of western education and colonial enterprise As a result of the absence of a university in Nigeria until 1948 when a university college was established in Ibadan, those Nigerians in search of higher educational qualifications but had no financial where withal to travel oversees to pursue their dream had no alternative than to embrace correspondence education which afforded them the opportunity of studying to acquire higher degrees without leaving the shores of the country (Omolewa, 1982). Thus, correspondence education became acceptable to these Nigerians mostly from the southern part of the country. By 1887, some Nigerians, for the first time, enrolled for the examination of University of London as external students studying through correspondence without any assistance from any established institution in Nigeria to prepare them for the examination. They all performed woefully in the examination as all of them failed (Omolewa, 1982).

But by the first decade of the twentieth century, some Nigerians had not only passed the matriculation examination but had also graduated and obtained the degrees of London University in various disciplines as external students. It is instructive to state that the assistance provided by some British correspondence colleges notably the University Correspondence College, Wolsey Hall, Rapid Result Colleges etc contributed significantly to the success of these Nigerians in the examination. Notable among them were Eyo Ita and H. O. Davies who both passed the London Matriculation Examinations in 1925, E. O. Ajayi and Alvan Ikoku both obtained the University's degree in philosophy in 1927 and 1929 respectively. J. S. Ogunlesi obtained a degree in Philosophy in 1933 (Omolewa, 1985).

In spite of the establishment of a University College in Ibadan in 1998, many Nigerians continued to patronize the British correspondence Colleges which eventually assisted in building the careers of the early educated elites in Nigeria. The impression advanced by some scholars that correspondence education emerged and became accepted in Nigeria because of the absence of a University (which could have provided higher educational opportunity to many people) was not only erroneous but also misleading. This is because, even after Nigeria's independence in 1960 and with the establishment of many universities, correspondence education, which later transformed to distance education, continued to be a viable alternative educational delivery system with the inauguration of many providing agencies even within the established orthodox universities. Ahmadu Bello University became the first institution of distance education system to carry out a special training programme tagged "The correspondence and Teachers' In-Services Programmes (TISEP)". In 1974, the Distance Learning Institute (DLI), then known as Correspondence Open Studies Unit (COSU), was established at the University of Lagos to produce university graduates in those disciplines where there were serious national shortfalls in higher level manpower production in Nigeria. In 1976 the first independent distance education institution, the National Teachers Institute (NTI) was established in Nigeria. On May 1, 1980, the First National Open University was established but was suspended in 1984. In the same vein, the Distance Learning Centre (DLC) then called the (Centre for External Studies) was established at the University of Ibadan in 1984. The University of Abuja which was established on January 1, 1988 as a dual mode university with the mandate to run both conventional and distance learning programmes. It was the first University in Nigeria to assume such dual mandate of running both conventional and distance learning programmes at the same time.

Policy and Practice of Distance Education in Nigeria

Distance education has the following characteristics as identified by ADEA working Group on Distance Education and Open Learning (2002). These characteristics are: institutional accreditation where learning is certified by an institution or agency; the use of variety of media for instructional delivery; provision of two-way communication to ensure tutor-learner and learner-learner interaction; and the possibility of face-to-

face meetings for tutorials for learner-learner interaction; and laboratory or practice session or library study. In terms of institutional accreditation, four distance learning institutions have been accredited, till date, by the National Universities Commissions (NUC), the body monitoring and regulating the activities of universities in Nigeria. Some of the distance learning institutions that have been accredited in Nigeria are:

1. The Distance Learning Institute (DLI) of University of Lagos.
2. The Distance Learning Centre (DLC) of University of Lagos.
3. The National Teachers' Institute, NTI), Kaduna.
4. The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), Lagos.
5. The Centre for Distance Learning (CDL), Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.

The other characteristics have been further classified as the main components common to majority of distance education systems by UNESCO under the following sub-headings:

1. The mission
2. Programmes and curricula
3. Teaching and learning strategies
4. Learning materials and resources
5. Communication between teachers and learners
6. Interaction between learners
7. Support delivered locally
8. The delivery system
9. The student and tutor sub-system
10. Staff and other experts
11. Effective management and administration
12. The requirement of housing and equipment
13. Evaluation

Unfortunately, the main components identified by UNESCO did not include quality assurance which incidentally is the key issue which has made distance education to be viewed with suspicion by many educational authorities-although, all the accredited distance learning institutions in Nigeria have well-stated and clear articulated policy statements on each of these components.

The mission of all the distance learning institutions in Nigeria is to provide access to education for those who, otherwise, would have been denied. For example, in 2008, 1,054,053 qualified applicants applied for admission into the regular programme of the conventional universities in Nigeria. Out of this number, only 200,000 applicants or 19.0% were offered admission while 81.0% were denied admission. Therefore, distance learning institutions are expected to mop-up the leftover of the conventional universities. This is the more reason why distance education is becoming an attractive educational option in Nigeria.

In terms of programme and curricula, all the distance learning institutions provide courses in preparation for examinations and degrees which are equivalent or similar to those offered by conventional institutions in Nigeria and such programmes, in most cases, are subjected to similar regulations of the conventional universities in terms of: content, admission and assessment. The major teaching and learning strategies adopted by these distance institution in Nigeria are: print and written electronic mail correspondences between the tutors and the learners. The teaching methodology is usually carried-on in form of face-to-face meeting or contact between the tutors and the learners during the compulsory six-week residential stay of the learners in the institutions. The study centres, except that of the National Open University, are practically non-existent and non-functioning. Although, the learners are expected to engage in self-study of the course materials, most of the teaching is conducted during the residential stay of the learners. However, modern technology in terms of web-based instruction as well as multimedia is hardly used by these institutions. Audio and video are sometimes used to complement the print by these institutions.

Comprehensive and well-developed course materials, which the conventional students most times equally used, are the learning materials and resources often used by these distance education institutions. Communication between the tutors and the learners is much more given prominent attention by these institutions. Communication is facilitated mostly through assignment writing, specified in form of pre and post-test in the course materials. The advent of modern communication and information technologies has promoted the use of electronic mail correspondence to facilitate interaction between the tutors and the learners.

Interaction between learners or learner-learner interaction has not been accorded much attention by distance education institution in Nigeria (Aderionoye and Ojokheta, 2004). The only time when there is learners-learner interaction is during the face-to-face contact period with the tutors. Support delivered locally in the form that allows for some kind of direct, face-to-face, interaction between the learners and the tutors is completely organized as face-to-face events. Local support which is usually given in a study centre or resource centre is very minimal.

The policy statement of ODL institutions in Nigeria on the delivery system involved the distribution of pre-packaged materials, usually called the course materials, to students which they are expected to study independently with occasional interaction with the tutors through written correspondences. The culture of using electronic mail to exchange correspondences with the tutor is not significantly pronounced among the learners. Similarly, face-to-face lectures constitute a significant component of the delivery system.

The housing and accommodation policy of both the single and dual mode distance learning institutions does not allow for residential students. In dual mode, existing classrooms, lecture theatres, among others, used for conventional students are equally used for distance learning students while the only single mode institution usually makes use of facilities existing in local institution(s) nearest to the study centre.

There appears to be a working policy statement on the student and tutor sub-system by ODL institutions in Nigeria. The admission procedures into ODL programmes are clearly specified and the procedures are not significantly different from that used to admit students into the conventional programmes. The dual mode distance institutions make-use of lecturers who teach the same courses to conventional students while the only single mode institution recruits tutors on part-time basis and trained them to teach the courses. The universities of these part-time lecturers are heavily monitored by the institution.

Other experts like instructional designers, develops and produces, media experts, marketing experts, and administrative staff are recruited, mostly as full-time staff, based on their competencies and qualifications. To a larger extent, the competencies of these various experts and staff have

helped in the effective management and administration of ODL institutions in Nigeria. In terms of evaluation of students' progress in their learning, ODL institutions in Nigeria evaluate students' progress in line with the existing procedures used for conventional students.

The Practice of Distance Education in Nigeria

The practice of distance education in Nigeria has been bedeviled with myriad of problems. Some of these problems, as identified by Yusuff (2006) include: lack of government funding, ineffectiveness of managers of distance education in various institutions, inadequate facilities to march the explosion in enrolment rate, energy related problems, Low-Tele-Density, Lack of consistency in programme and policy implementation, poor postal system, and inadequate ICT penetration. All these are discussed below:

Lack of Government Funding – Studies of Distance Education in the E-9 countries revealed that lack of government funding has hindered the quality and effective coordination of distance education initiatives in Nigeria. Thus distance education in Nigeria is being used as revenue generating venture and as a way of increasing institutions Internally Generated Revenue (IGR).

Ineffectiveness of Managers – Borishade's (2007) study on the effectiveness of ODL managers in various institutions revealed some ineffectiveness in the area of manager (staff) manager (student) and manager (community relationship). The reasons responsible for this, according to him, are: the employment of temporary lecturers, non-availability of accommodation for students during the programme, and the communities outrageous cost in the provision of accommodation for students. For example, it was found that the lecturers are more interested in the monetary benefits to the detriment of what the students would achieve in their involvement in open and distance learning.

Problem Associated with Admission Processing – Borishade (2007) also found that the admission processes in ODL programmes suffer credibility since entrance examinations are not usually conducted for admission into ODL programmes. In addition, the time schedule for ODL

programmes was found inadequate and insufficient for the lecturers and students to effectively complete the course work. Besides, the higher number of candidates usually admitted into ODL programmes increases the staff-student ratio and overstressed the available human and non-human resources. When the regular university lecturers cannot effectively cope with the teaching of the course, lecturers have to be locally recruited. This is why ODL institutions in Nigeria are often accused of placing profit-making motive above academic and professional considerations. Similarly, students results are often not released on time, lecture and examination timetables are not strictly adhered to and these directly or indirectly affect the psyche of the learners in their commitment to distance learning system in Nigeria.

Problem of Insufficient Academic Staff and other Related Staff to March the High Rate of Students' Admission into ODL Programmes – The primary purpose of ODL institutions in Nigeria is often to provide access to education without taken into due consideration the availability of human and materials resources in relation to access. The implication of this is that teaching and learning processes in ODL are usually beset with myriad of problems. For example, lecturers find it extremely difficult to cope with the massive students' enrolment. Similarly, Obemeata (2000) found, in a study, that the study habits students in ODL programmes in Nigeria are poor: "they crammed the courses just to pass, some of them do not know how to use the library and its facilities, most of them are not interested in the acquisition of knowledge and skills rather they are merely interested in the acquisition of certificates."

Power Outage – In Nigeria, power supply is enormously erratic. This makes the application of ICT imperatively difficult for ODL programmes. This informs the reason why ODL institutions in Nigeria still rely heavily on print materials. Alternative sources of power supply, for example, the use of generators, are, to a greater extent, considered a luxury in Nigeria especially the educational purposes.

Inadequate-Tele-Density – In Nigeria, a significant proportion of the citizenry lacks access to telecommunication tools such as the computers, and internet facilities, among others, especially for learning purposes. For example, even with the emergence of Global System of Mobile (GSM)

communication in Nigeria in 2001, it is estimated that about 60 million subscribers are available on the networks. This shows that about 80 million Nigerians still do not have access to telephone (Olaegbe, 2009). Even though, this number may have reduced in the last one year due to the massive reduction in the prices of procuring telephone handsets in Nigeria, there is still the prevalence of poor quality telecommunication services nationwide.

Inadequate Postal Delivery System – The postal system in Nigeria, even though has improved due to the many impressive innovations introduced into the system, has not yet met the requirements of international standards. For example, the postal system still lacks quick delivery, according to international standards, and safety of parcels, letters, among others. Since an efficient postal service is very germane to the successful implementation of ODL programmes (especially in countries that heavily rely on print medium of communication like Nigeria) it can be fathomed that ODL programmes will continue to suffer serious implementation problem as long as the postal system is inadequate.

Inadequate ICT Penetration – Nigeria, like most African Countries, lacks the basic ICT infrastructure. For example, a study conducted by the Nigerian Information Technology Professionals (NITP) in America in 2002 revealed that: given the current ICT penetration in Nigeria, it may take the country 50 years to catch-up with America in terms of personal computer count per households (Iromantu, 2004). In Nigeria, the cost of procuring a personal computer is on the high side considering the poverty situation prevalent in the country.

Lack of Credible Policy on Quality Assurance System – One major problem plaguing the general acceptability ODL in Nigeria, as an alternative educational delivery, is the issue of credible quality assurance. As said earlier, ODL institutions in Nigeria are accused of paying much attention to the issue of access at the detriment of quality. In concurrence with this assertion, there exists no comprehensive and credible quality assurance system put in place by the ODL institutions in Nigeria. For ODL to assume the status of a standard and alternative component of educational delivery system in Nigeria, a comprehensive and credible

quality assurance system must be instituted in line with that employed by mega distance learning universities in the world.

Towards Renewed Invigoration: Recommendations

There is no doubt that ODL in Nigeria is still in its embryonic stage but there is a great assurance that ODL will live and survive in Nigeria as a standard and alternative components of the educational system especially with the resuscitation of the suspended National Open University in 2002. However, there is the urgent need for a renewed invigoration if ODL in Nigeria is to assume the above status. The renewed invigoration should especially focus on the following areas:

1. The development of comprehensive and coherent strategic vision for the future of Open and Distance Learning to guide future policy development over the medium and long term in harmony with national social and economic objectives in Nigeria.

2. The establishment of sound instruments for steering Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria. An evaluation of staff expertise and current skill needs may be useful to identify potential mismatches and to develop professional development and training programmes to keep pace with changing demands.

3. Strengthen the ability of Open and Distance Learning Institutions to align with national tertiary education strategy. This can be accomplished if management of Open and Distance Learning Institutions are able to engage in more deliberate and focused self-management as well as being able to prepare, and regularly update, meaningful strategic plans.

4. The design of a quality assurance framework consistent with the goals of Open and Distance learning. It is important, in order to build a national commitment to Open and Distance Learning, that the quality assurance system be made clear and expectations be formulated in alignment with the tertiary education strategy. A strong quality culture, shared by the academic leadership, staff, and students helps to reinforce the quality assurance system.

5. The resuscitation of a vibrant, dynamic and efficient student support services to cushion the effect of the isolation of the learners from their tutors as well as from other learners. Similarly, administrative support services should be re-organise to make learning relatively easy, interesting, and stimulating to engage in especially in the study centres.

6. The incorporation of modern technologies for the presentation of information and for communication between the participants of ODL programmes. Such modern technologies include: digital audio-tape, video, radio, television, computers with installed internet facilities. Haddad (2007), has succinctly divided learning technologies into two categories: technologies in location and technologies of distance. Technologies in location are: printed materials, slides, transparencies, scanners, digital notepads, chalk-boards, audiotapes, films and videos, digital books, CDs and computer projection. Technologies of distance are: correspondence, radio, television, web pages, web internet, intranet, and webcast. The internet, according to Gunadasa (2007) is the most successful educational tools to have appeared in a long time because it offers a global open platform storage, display, and communication. It contributes and integrates text graphics, audio and videos with communication tools such as e-mail, bulletin boards, and chat rooms to promote synchronous and asynchronous interaction among students and tutors. Adeya and Oyeyinka (2005) equally asserted that Internet has arguably emerged as the most visible component of the dynamic developments of ICT. Chinien (2007) also contended that "new ICTs have dramatically changed the way we live, learn, work and even think about work. The synergy of combining globalization with new technology has had dramatic economic and social impacts. It has created new opportunities as well as new challenges and uncertainties." These technologies, according to Haddad (2007), have proven to be effective ways of enabling high-quality educational materials to reach remote clientele and overcome geographical and cultural hurdles. The incorporation of these technologies, especially for teaching-learning processes, as well as for assignments and assessment will make distance learning system attractive to prospective students. The over-

reliance of ODL institutions on print media/materials is old-fashioned and, therefore, outdated.

7. Proper funding of ODL in Nigeria. It may be difficult to define proper funding, but budgetary provision usually allocated to higher educational system should be grouped into two categories: the conventional system and the open-distance learning system. If this is done, the negative public image of ODL in Nigeria will gradually disappear. Besides, proper and adequate funding of ODL in Nigeria will tremendously assist ODL institutions to make adequate provision for both infrastructural and instructional facilities for ODL programmes. Besides, the major difficulty faced by universities in Nigeria in their inability to get their distance learning programmes accredited by the National Universities Commission (NUC) is the inadequate provision of infrastructural and instructional facilities to support their ODL programmes. Therefore, if budgetary provision is made for ODL in Nigeria, this will go a long way to ease the problem of infrastructural and instructional facilities.

8. Consistency in the benchmarks usually adopted by the universities regulatory body in Nigeria - the National Universities Commission—to ensure compliance with the Minimum Academic Standards (MAS) by ODL institutions in Nigeria. A situation where inconsistency exists in the minimum academic standard expected to be attained and maintained by conventional tertiary institutions and ODL institutions does not augur well for the growth and development of ODL in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Open and Distance learning has come of age in Nigeria. It has transformed from its earlier stage where it was embraced by knowledge-driven individuals to contemporary stage where it is being embraced by knowledge-driven society. In order to reduce the knowledge gap created by the inability of the conventional tertiary institutions in Nigeria to satisfy the educational demand of prospective qualified candidates, Open and Distance Learning mechanism is fast being accepted as a standard and alternative component of the educational delivery as well as for building a

knowledge society. However, if Open and Distance Learning is to contribute to social and economic development of Nigeria through the four major missions identified in the OECD Thematic Review of Tertiary Education, (2008) which are: the formation of human capital, the building of knowledge bases, the dissemination and use of knowledge, and the maintenance of knowledge in form of inter-generational storage and transmission of knowledge, then the reforms and recommendations suggested above need to be urgently implemented. It is when this is done that Open and distance Learning Institutions in Nigeria can attain the mega-university status obtained in other parts of the world.

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