Review of the NSW Higher School Certificate Disability Provisions Program

A review commissioned by the Board of Studies NSW

Damian Ellis and Beverley Johnson
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1.0 Executive Summary and Recommendations

Damian Ellis and Beverley Johnson, former school principals, were engaged by the Board of Studies NSW (BOS) to undertake an external review of the disability provisions program for the Higher School Certificate (HSC) examinations. In particular, the views of principals and teachers who are responsible for lodging applications and implementing BOS decisions of over 60 schools were consulted in the course of the Review.

Conclusion

The Review Team found that the current application processes are, on the whole, clear and straightforward for principals and teachers. The new online process has facilitated the process for many teachers who are both familiar with the original process and are also adept in using technology. For others the online process needs to have the documents and forms centralised and the process more intuitive.

For the majority of students, there are no barriers that prevent particular groups of the examination cohort from participating in the disability provisions program, including the appeals process. However, in some schools, particular cultural groups believe that an application for disability provisions brings shame to themselves and their community and this misunderstanding prevents them from applying for or accepting provisions. Some students do not participate in the program, especially Year 10 students, because they do not want to be seen as different, but this appears to be less of a problem in Year 12. In some low SES schools, the inability of parents or schools to pay for specialist reports, disadvantages students. Students who are at a considerable distance from medical centres find it difficult to gain access to professional reports.

The majority of schools agree that the relevant documentation required by the Board of Studies is necessary and sufficient to demonstrate a student's needs in an examination situation. The quantum of documentation is often found to be onerous and time-consuming, and the type of documentation for particular disabilities is an issue.

There was no indication, either from the data presented by the officers of the Board or by responses from the schools involved in the Review, that particular schools seek the approval of unwarranted provisions for their students. In fact, schools believe that the processes of the Board are so stringent that it would be difficult to apply for or gain unwarranted provisions.

On the whole, schools find the accommodations or adjustments granted to the student appropriate and reasonable.

The schools, without exception, found the services of the Board officers to be helpful and necessary to ensure the integrity and accessibility of the processes.
The recommendations of this Review are presented in the context of a commitment to continuous improvement.

Recommendations

1. That the email contact with schools regarding completion of an application, missing documents and decisions, be increased and include the principal and the coordinator (2.1.1).

2. That consideration be given to reducing the number of teacher comments, and essays required to support the application (2.1.2, 2.2.2, 2.2.3, 2.4.1, 2.4.4).

3. That access to the application process commences earlier than the current arrangements (2.1.3, 2.4.3, 2.6.5).

4. That the Board review the information available on the currency rule for medical documentation, particularly for conditions that will not change, for example diabetes, and communicate the information to schools (2.1.4, 2.3.2, 2.3.3, 2.4.5).

5. That the Board review the advice given to schools when an application is declined so that schools are better informed for future applications (2.1.5, 2.6.1).

6. That the Board introduces a familiarisation training course for school personnel for the online process, for example, an online tutorial or videoconference (2.2.1).

7. That the Board review the online program, make greater use of dropdown boxes, and include a table of conditions, provisions and evidence required (2.2.4).

8. That all the documents and forms are available on the online site prior to making an application (2.2.5).

9. That community language brochures, including English, be developed for parents (2.3.1).

10. That the Board maintains the highly-valued phone support as an integral part of the process (2.3.5).

11. That consideration be given to changing the name of the program from Disability Provisions (2.3.6).
12. That an opportunity be made for the Support Teacher Learning Assistance (STLA), Special Needs teacher or counsellor, responsible for the student, to comment in order to give further specific information (2.4.2).

13. That the Board invites counsellors, coordinators, teachers and interested staff to professional development and information sessions concerning the Disability Provisions program (2.4.6).

14. That the Board provides further information about the range of provisions to meet the needs of students with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, Asperger’s and autism (2.6.2).

15. That the Board considers measures of cognitive disabilities such as low working memory scores or low processing speed and the availability of provisions for such criteria (2.6.3).

16. That the Board better communicates the nature, limits and considerations concerning the use of computers in examinations for students with a severe, diagnosed writing disability (2.6.4).

1.1 Purpose of Project

The purpose of this project was to undertake a review of the processes of the Board of Studies 2011 Disability Provisions program for Higher School Certificate (HSC) candidates.

1.2 The Terms of Reference

The objectives of the Review were to research and respond to the following questions:

1. Is the current application process clear and straightforward for principals and teachers?

2. Has the new online application process facilitated the process? Is there any way that this could be further improved?

3. Are there any issues (for example, cultural, financial, distance or resources) that prevent particular groups of the examination cohort from participating in the disability provisions program (including the appeals process) to the same extent as other groups?
4. Is the relevant documentation required by the Board of Studies necessary and sufficient to demonstrate the implications of the student’s need on their functioning in an examination situation?

5. Is there any evidence that particular schools seek the approval of unwarranted provisions for their students?

6. Are the accommodations or adjustments granted to the student appropriate and reasonable?

1.3 Introduction and Context

The Board of Studies continuously seeks to ensure the quality, fairness and equity of the BOS application processes and the accessibility of Disability Provisions to all students who qualify.

To this end, there has been an independent audit of the processes involved in the Disability Provisions program every year since 2007. (Note: prior to 2011, the Disability Provisions program was known as Special Examination Provisions).

The Disability Provisions Program

Disability provisions are practical arrangements designed to assist students who will have difficulty in reading and/or responding to the School Certificate tests or the Higher School Certificate examinations. Any provisions granted are solely determined by how the student’s examination performance is affected. Provisions may include large print papers, use of a reader and/or writer, extra time or rest breaks.

Applications for disability provisions are lodged by the school, on behalf of the student, in one or more of the categories of learning, medical, hearing or vision difficulties. Applications are lodged by authorised school staff via Schools Online. Depending on the provisions sought, applications may require evidence from a health professional, the results of reading or spelling tests, samples of the student’s work and teacher comments.

For certain provisions, Principals have been delegated the authority to approve the application. Delegated Board officers make decisions on other provisions. Schools may appeal decisions made by the Board, and appeals are considered by other delegated Board officers, often with reference to recommendations from independent health experts retained by the Board.

The program is administered by the Student Support Services Branch of the Office of the Board of Studies. Over 11 000 applications are processed each year.

### 1.4 Review Methodology

The two Reviewers achieved the Review objectives by:

- Meeting with BOS personnel to receive documentation pertaining to processes and statistics regarding disability provisions.

- Analysing the percentage of applications and the outcomes of those applications from all schools across NSW.

- Selecting samples of schools, which had no applications for disability provisions and others who had less than 4% and samples of schools that had over 13% above the state average as well as others who had percentages around the mean. Schools represented came from the three sectors, State schools, including Distance Education, Catholic systemic schools and Independent schools, including country schools. A total of 63 schools responded.

- Contacting by phone, the Principals of the nominated schools to explain to them the purpose of the Review and to arrange a mixture of face-to-face interviews, phone interviews and written surveys to research the objectives of the Review.

- Interviewing Board personnel to clarify the Board processes including online processes.

- Analysing data to identify findings, issues and recommendations.

- Preparing a draft report for management comment.

- Issuing a final report.
2.0 Analysis and Overview

2.1 Is the current application process clear and straightforward for principals and teachers?

Findings
When teachers are familiar with the process it is clear and straightforward. Schools were particularly positive about the support provided by the Student Support Services Branch at the Board and want the phone contact maintained. This was seen as essential for the continued success of the program.

Some schools consider it is a convoluted process. Some schools do not understand what is required to get an approval. Most schools consider teacher feedback sheets, tests and the collection of two essays are significant in terms of workload. Some thought not all provisions were listed e.g. that the school could apply for a teacher’s aide to assist children with autism/Aspergers syndrome.

2.1.1 Issue
Schools advised that they wanted an improvement in the notification process regarding completion of an application, missing documents and decisions. They would prefer early notification rather than have to go on to the website each time to check.

Recommendation
- That the email contact with schools, regarding completion of an application, missing documents and decisions, be increased and include the principal and the coordinator.

2.1.2 Issue
Schools considered that the time needed to gather evidence for each application is onerous.

Recommendation
- That consideration be given to reducing the number of teacher comments, and essays required to support the application.

2.1.3 Issue
Schools commented that the process from application to notifications from the Board is sometimes too late to provide practice.

Recommendation
- That access to the application process commences earlier than the current arrangements.
2.1.4 Issue
A number of schools considered some conditions never change and should not require new certificates.

Recommendation
- That the Board review the information available on the currency rule for medical documentation, particularly for conditions that will not change, for example diabetes, and communicate the information to schools.

2.1.5 Issue
Some schools felt there was not enough guidance given when applications were declined. They wanted examples of good practice and sample comments.

Recommendation
- That the Board review the advice given to schools when an application is declined so that schools are better informed for future applications.

2.2 Has the new online application process facilitated the process? Is there any way that this could be further improved?

Findings
Some schools found it had been refined since 2010. Some schools found the online process better and more efficient. It was quicker and saved mail costs. Some wanted the option of posting. Schools with large numbers of disability provisions found significant resources were required.

There is confusion with categories e.g. where does behaviour fit? Some subtleties are not allowed because of the rigid nature of the online process. Some said all provisions were not listed.

In some schools, one person did the online data entry and in other schools the teachers had access to put in their comments. Workload was a recurring theme; with many schools considering the online process had substantially increased it. Schools have been surprised to find applications were not submitted when they thought they were.

2.2.1 Issue
A number of schools commented that new users found the online process difficult.

Recommendation
- That the Board introduce a familiarisation training course for school personnel for the online process, for example, an online tutorial or videoconference.
2.2.2 Issue
Almost half the schools considered the online process has increased the time for each application, in some cases doubling the time taken. The workload for coordinators has increased including double handling of teacher comments and there has been increased technical and clerical support required.

Recommendation
• That consideration be given to reducing the number of teacher comments, and essays required to support the application.

2.2.3 Issue
Scanning presented a number of issues for schools including the lack of an appropriate scanner, amount of time, technical expertise and increased use of other personnel.

Recommendation
• That consideration be given to reducing the number of teacher comments and essays required to support the application.

2.2.4 Issue
A number of schools had difficulty finding where all the provisions were listed. There appeared to be no space for ticking provisions that can be granted at the discretion of the principal.

Recommendation
• That the Board review the online program, make greater use of dropdown boxes, and include a table of conditions, provisions and evidence required.

2.2.5 Issue
A number of schools found the online application was difficult to navigate when looking for forms.

Recommendation
• That all the documents and forms are available on the online site prior to making an application.
2.3 Are there any issues (for example, cultural, financial, distance or resources) that prevent particular groups of the examination cohort from participating in the disability provisions program (including the appeals process) to the same extent as other groups?

Findings
Some schools had no issues with cultural and distance issues. Most schools had concerns about the time required for the program and some had concerns about access to medical specialists.

Many schools were very positive about the Board response to reviews, appeals and emergencies. The person on the end of the phone was essential to the success of the program.

Cultural
Many schools were able to address their cultural issues satisfactorily. Schools found that the feeling of shame was a critical part of why some students would not access the provisions. They did not want to be labelled. Some considered it a privacy matter. Community language information is required because parents do not understand the information about disability provisions.

2.3.1 Issue
Some parents and students are reluctant to engage in the program because of the shame they associated with disabilities.

Recommendation
- That community language brochures, including English, be developed for parents.

Financial
Parents were reluctant to access medical specialists particularly if they had to do it again for a current diagnosis. While some schools provide some financial support, schools report not all students can afford assessments and that they do not have the resources to supplement this need.

2.3.2 Issue
Some parents were unable, for financial reasons, to access medical specialists.

Recommendation
- That the Board review the information available on the currency rule for medical documentation, particularly for conditions that will not change, for example diabetes, and communicate the information to schools.
Distance
Access to medical specialists is a distance issue for some schools requiring a parent to take a whole day particularly in the country areas and for some they must take public transport with only one bus a day.

2.3.3 Issue
Some schools considered distance was a critical issue in preventing parents seeking specialists again in the case of ongoing conditions.

**Recommendation**
- That the Board review the information available on the currency rule for medical documentation, particularly for conditions that will not change, for example diabetes, and communicate the information to schools.

Resources
Some schools reported a problem with access to medical personnel and counsellors. It was reported there was no occupational therapist available in some areas.

A recurring theme was the cost in staff time required to gather the information. Venues are difficult to access in terms of suitability and number of venues required, if it is a large cohort, particularly in country regions.

2.3.4 Issue
Schools recognise that some of these issues have to be managed in the best way possible at the local level. Time, costs of some specialists and availability of specialists were recurring themes.

**Recommendation**
- The recommendations in this report will go some way to addressing these issues.

Appeals Process
Schools commented very positively on the review and appeals process.

2.3.5 Issue
Generally schools have found the Board very helpful when it has come to the matter of appeals and have not felt that any students are disadvantaged by the appeals process.

**Recommendation**
- That the Board maintains the highly-valued phone support as an integral part of the process.
Name of the Program

2.3.6 Issue

The majority of schools consulted considered the name ‘Disability Provisions’ would be a barrier to students, already unsure of participating, because of how they may be perceived. Schools felt that a number of students already resisted participating in the program because they did not want to be labelled. They had the perception that they would be seen as different.

Recommendation

- That consideration be given to changing the name of the program from Disability Provisions.

2.4 Is the relevant documentation required by the Board of Studies necessary and sufficient to demonstrate the implications of the student’s need on their functioning in an examination situation?

Findings

Approximately half of the school personnel from a wide range of schools agree, without further comment, that the relevant documentation required by the Board of Studies is necessary and sufficient to demonstrate the implications of the student’s need on their functioning in an examination situation. Many state that the documentation is “at the right level, makes sense, ensures the integrity of the process and yet is fair to students, parents and schools.”

Principals and teachers reiterate their appreciation of the support of Board officers when any queries arise. However, there have been a number of suggestions made by a range of schools which they believe would improve the process. These include the following issues.

2.4.1 Issue

A considerable number of schools suggest that having to gather the comments of all teachers who teach a student is onerous, time consuming and repetitive.

Recommendation

- That consideration be given to reducing the number of teacher comments, and essays required to support the application.
2.4.2 Issue

Some classroom teachers do not have the relevant history and information regarding the student, given the applications are due in term one. Some teachers do not have sufficient understanding of the implications of the student’s disability. The special needs teacher or counsellor is in the best position to comment on the impact of the student’s disability on their functioning in an examination situation.

Recommendations

• That an opportunity be made for the Support Teacher Learning Assistance (STLA), Special Needs teacher or counsellor, responsible for the student, to comment in order to give further specific information.

2.4.3 Issue

The evidence required from professionals can be difficult to obtain by the end of term one. Some professional reports are difficult to access for country schools.

Recommendation

• That access to the application process commences earlier than the current arrangements.

2.4.4 Issue

There is a common issue that the requirement for two timed essays to be produced is onerous because of the timing of examinations. The schools believe that practice essays are artificial.

Recommendation

• That consideration be given to reducing the number of teacher comments, and essays required to support the application.

2.4.5 Issue

The requirement for recent documentation, especially professional reports, is seen to be costly, time consuming and repetitive particularly when the disability is permanent and will not change from Year 7 to Year 12.

Recommendation

• That the Board review the information available on the currency rule for medical documentation, particularly for conditions that will not change, for example diabetes, and communicate the information to schools.
2.4.6 Issue
The reports for anxiety and mental health problems can be a challenge. There is an uncertainty in terms of documents required, especially for students with Autism or Asperger's syndrome where their ability to function in an exam situation is greatly hindered by their condition. There is also an issue of privacy in relation to these disabilities, as some students do not wish teachers to have this information. Some schools have requested model applications.

Recommendation
- That the Board invites counsellors, coordinators, teachers and interested staff to professional development and information sessions concerning the Disability Provisions program.

2.5 Is there any evidence that particular schools seek the approval of unwarranted provisions for their students?

Findings
While there is a difference in the percentages of students who apply for disability provisions from different schools, there is a wide range of applications across all systems. The schools interviewed, described thorough processes to identify students who were eligible for disability provisions, a commitment to ensure that there were no barriers to the application and a professional commitment to the integrity of the process.

The schools that were questioned about the possibility of unwarranted provisions being submitted all believed that the Board of Studies processes were so stringent that it would be unlikely that widespread rorting could occur.

They were adamant that professional bodies, which worked with the schools to support their students, would never collude to support unwarranted applications. They also believe that professionals would have to be blatantly dishonest to be involved in supporting the application for unwarranted provisions and they did not believe that this was likely to occur.

2.6 Are the accommodations or adjustments granted to the student appropriate and reasonable?

Findings
Most schools agree that the accommodations or adjustments granted to the student are appropriate and reasonable. When any concerns or issues arise, Board officers are readily contactable by phone and are helpful and flexible in resolving
issues. Schools have found the Board to be receptive and open-minded to appeals where they have considered that the conditions of the Disability Discrimination Act and the Disability Standards for Education were not met as a result of the initial decision. Schools also endorse the Board’s philosophy that the “rules for who is eligible should be clear, strict andstringently applied.”

**2.6.1 Issue**

There is limited feedback provided by the Board for unsuccessful candidates. Often, those candidates granted provisions may be less in need in the professional judgement of school personnel.

**Recommendation**

- That the Board review the advice given to schools when an application is declined so that schools are better informed for future applications.

**2.6.2 Issue**

Provisions for students with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, Autism or Asperger’s may not be sufficient or appropriate in some cases. Some teachers have mentioned that they have heard of rare provisions but do not have any information on what these provisions may be. They mention the possibilities of paraphrasing questions, having a reader prompt progress for students with OCD or Asperger’s and Autism who procrastinate because of their perfectionism/anxiety.

**Recommendation**

- That the Board provides further information about the range of provisions to meet the needs of students with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, Asperger’s and autism.

**2.6.3 Issue**

The panel was made aware of certain psychometric testing that measures low working memory scores or low processing speed scores.

**Recommendation**

- That the Board considers measures of cognitive disabilities such as low working memory scores or low processing speed and the availability of provisions for such criteria.
2.6.4 Issue

There is a perception that the Board has made it more difficult for the use of computers in the case of students diagnosed with a writing disability. Computers for those students with a diagnosed writing disability would greatly reduce undue stress and discomfort and therefore allow them to demonstrate their knowledge appropriately.

Recommendation

- That the Board better communicates the nature, limits and considerations concerning the use of computers in examinations for students with a severe, diagnosed writing disability.

2.6.5 Issue

There is a huge problem for schools and for the student, if the student has been granted disability provisions throughout their high school life and they are then not granted at Year 12 level. There are also many schools which do not offer provisions to students until the Trial Examination or until they receive the decision by the Board of Studies, thus disadvantaging students, who have not had practice with the relevant provisions.

Recommendation

- That access to the application process commences earlier than the current arrangements.

3.0 Examples of Good Practice

Findings

Most schools have in place thorough and proactive approaches to identifying and supporting students with disabilities to apply for appropriate disability provisions.

In consultation with schools involved with this research, we have compiled examples of good practice from a range of schools.

3.1 Processes involved in the identification of students with disabilities and their specific needs

- The Principal is the person who initially receives information and delegates the identification processes to responsible personnel.
- At enrolment, many students are identified in the enrolment process and by feeder schools.
• Students who receive special needs integration funding are automatically targeted. Known students with diabetes or other critical health issues (students who are currently undergoing cancer treatment etc) and students who have had a history of learning difficulty or language delay/disorder are included for consideration of eligibility.

• Students are identified by parents, feeder schools, teachers and outside medical providers such as doctors, occupational therapists and speech therapists.

• The use of external test material provided by parents, teacher identification from internal assessments, results from external tests such as NAPLAN, ICAS etc. and Special Needs administered test results (e.g. WISC and then SA spelling test, Neale and Woodcock tests).

• There is sometimes a collaborative committee formed, maybe the Learning Support Team together with the Welfare Team and led by a senior Leader such as Head Teacher Student Engagement, to identify students and monitor applications.

• The process is ongoing and responsive to changes in student progress.

• The involvement of Deputy or Assistant Principals, Year Advisers, Year Coordinators, or Academic Advisors for each Year group to monitor overall progress.

• Referrals from Year advisers, Year Coordinators, school counsellors and/or school psychologist alert appropriate personnel to emotional and mental health needs for students.

• Parents and students are informed about Disability Provisions in a number of ways, for example:
  
o Letters are sent home (to all in year 9 for year 10 and to selected students in year 11 for year 12) and parents indicate if an application is needed. The Special Education teacher initiates the application process with the support of the Year Coordinator.

  o The Support Teacher Learning Assistance (STLA) or Special Needs teacher talks to all students in Years 10 and 12 at an assembly to ask students to self identify any medical problems of which the school may not be aware. Some students self identify or parents contact the school.

  o The STLA or Special Needs teacher attends Year 9 and 11 meetings in Term 4 and Year 10 and 12 in Term 1, and advises students of disability provisions processes.
A notice is placed in school Newsletter to inform parents. This information outlines the eligibility requirements, types of provisions that may be granted and the procedure that needs to be followed including contact points.

Parents are referred to the Disability Provisions process on the Board of Studies website.

Individual interviews with parent if a concern arises.

**The better informed the parent, the more likely they are to apply.**

### 3.2 The timing of disability provisions to students

- Some schools provide school-based provisions from Year 7 to Year 12 to be as close as possible to BOS provisions for formal assessment tasks particularly if the student received them at feeder schools or in Year 10.
- Regular review of those students who are provided with disability provisions following exams, interventions and re-testing.
- After being re-assessed in Year 10 and Year 12 especially, these students are usually the students that remain on disability provisions.

### 3.3 The provisions of reader and writer

- Volunteer peers are recruited from the year below
- Volunteers need parental permission
- Volunteers are trained
- There is a roster created to share the load
- An award is given for community service.

### 3.4 Communication

- Key Learning Areas are notified of provisions for individual students.

### 4.0 Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the cooperation of the staff of the Board of Studies NSW, in particular the support of Mr Kevin Ford (Manager), Mr Neal Crocker, Ms Lorrae Skelcher, Ms Barbara Basso and the staff of the Student Support Services Branch for their responsiveness to our requests, for additional information and their conversations which clarified the complexity of the issues associated with the granting of disability provisions for examinations.

We thank them for the opportunity to undertake this project, which we have found to be interesting and rewarding to undertake.
We would also like to thank the Principals and staff members of the following schools, who participated so generously in the Review.

- Abbotsleigh, Wahroonga
- All Saints Catholic Senior College, Casula
- Aquinas College, Menai
- Bethany College, Hurstville
- Bethlehem College, Ashfield
- Birrong Boys High School
- Blayney High School
- Bonnyrigg High School
- Brigidine College, Randwick
- Canley Vale High School
- Catherine McAuley, Westmead.
- Charlton Christian College, Fassifern
- Cherrybrook Technology High School
- Chevalier College, Bowral
- Chifley College, Bidwill
- Clancy Catholic College, West Hoxton
- Condell Park High School
- Domremy College, Five Dock
- De La Salle College, Ashfield
- De La Salle College, Caringbah
- De La Salle College, Cronulla
- Dubbo School of Distance Education
- Eagle Vale High School
- Emmaus Catholic College, Kemps Creek
- Epping Boys High School
- Fairfield High School
- Fairvale High School
- Frensham School, Mittagong
- Holy Cross College, Ryde
• Holy Spirit College, Lakemba
• Kadina High School
• Kildare Catholic College, Wagga Wagga
• Lismore Catholic Secondary Schools (4)
• Liverpool Boys High School
• Loreto, Kirribilli
• Loyola Senior High School, Mt Druitt
• Macksville High School
• Malek Fahd Islamic School, Greenacre
• Marist College, Eastwood
• Marist College, Penshurst
• Marist Sisters’ College, Woolwich
• Mary MacKillop College, Wakeley
• Mount St Joseph, Milperra
• Northern Beaches Secondary College - Mackellar Girls Campus, Manley Vale
• Our Lady of Mercy College, Burraneer
• Oxley College, Bowral
• Patrician Brothers’ College, Blacktown
• Patrician Brothers’ College, Fairfield
• Southern Cross Catholic Vocational College, Burwood
• St John Bosco College, Engadine
• St Johns Park High School
• St Pauls Catholic College, Greystanes
• St Spyridon College, Maroubra
• St Ursula’s College, Kingsgrove
• St John’s College, Dubbo
• St Stanislaus’ College, Bathurst
• Trinity Catholic College, Auburn
• Tuggerah Lakes Secondary College – The Entrance Campus, Shelly Beach
• Xavier Catholic College, Ballina
• Xavier College, Llandilo
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