Perceived Understanding of Australian and Chinese Higher Education Systems: A Case Study on Australian Leadership Development Programmes

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Abstract This chapter explores the perceptions of Chinese HEI leaders' understanding of Australian and Chinese higher education (HE) systems after attending a three-week leadership development programme in Australia. A sample of six Chinese HEI leaders was selected from leadership development programmes that took place between 2013 and 2017. Qualitative data were collected from six interviews and four learning reports. The findings show that the Australian leadership development programmes enable Chinese HEI leaders to construct their understanding of the two HE systems, which includes the physical and social environment and university governance. I argue that the programme serves as a platform to shape their understanding. This chapter is relevant for those who work with HE leadership development in both Australia and China.

Keywords Chinese HEI leaders · Perceptions · HE systems · Australia · China

1 Introduction

Since the 2000s, transnational education (TNE) has become a phenomenon of increasing interest throughout the world of higher education (HE). Different approaches to TNE have been discussed, which have included mutual understanding, skills migration, revenue generation and capacity building (Gu, 2009; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2006). The capacity building approach views TNE as a means to meet unmet demands and to help build capacity for quality HE (OECD, 2006), and this has been of particular interest in China (Ding, 2019). Australian higher education institutions (HEIs) have been actively promoting partnerships with Chinese HEIs, for example through TNE leadership development programmes. Between 2012 and 2018, Ministry of Education, China (MoE) sent 268 Chinese HEI leaders to attend 12 leadership development programmes in Australia.

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The Australian leadership development programmes are seen as part of the *overseas leadership development programmes* (MoE, 2012).

Although TNE represents a growing percentage of China's higher education conducted in host countries, research from the receiving country's perspective is significantly under-represented (Knight & Liu, 2017, p. 15). In addition, studies on the impact of the TNE programme on the HEI leaders are largely wanting. Most studies that have been done (e.g., British Council & German Academic Exchange Service, 2014; Constanze, 2010) are about university students and teachers. In relation to the impact of the Sino-Australian TNE programme, Wang's (2007) study showed that Chinese educational leaders shifted their task/directive-orientated concepts of leadership to motivation/collaborative-orientated concepts after attending an Australian leadership development programme. In a later study, Wang (2014) found that the Australian leadership development programme enabled Chinese HEI leaders to explore leadership challenges and future developments in teaching, research and HE management between China and Australia. In addition, an increasing number of studies have investigated trainees' individual reflections on their understanding of the Australian HE system and the implications for Chinese counterparts (i.e., Ding, 2010; Fang, 2005; Han et al., 2009; He, 2015; Li, 2004; Si & Hou, 2012; Yang, 2018; Zhang & Zhang, 2016; Zou, 2008). Nevertheless, the above-mentioned studies have examined only one Australian leadership development programme, and most of them focused on Chinese HEI leaders from elite Chinese HEIs. To capture the bigger picture of Chinese HEI leaders' understanding of both the Australian and Chinese HE systems, especially the perspective of those from non-elite Chinese HEIs, it is necessary to study multiple Australian leadership development programmes. Therefore, this chapter aims to fill the gap by studying the impact of several Australian leadership development programmes from the perspectives of trainees, and specifically, Chinese HEI leaders from non-elite Chinese HEIs. In this chapter, TNE refers to Australian leadership development programmes for Chinese HEI leaders. The research question is: How do Chinese HEI leaders perceive the impact of Australian leadership development programmes on their understanding of Australian and Chinese HE systems?

2 Higher Education Systems in Australia and China

In this section, I utilize the framework for 'education characteristics in three societies (agricultural, industrial and information)', as proposed by Gu and Xue (1998), to review HE systems in Australia and China. This framework includes the four categories: (1) educational ideology and content, (2) finance and property, (3) education system and governance, and (4) students and teachers. It can be seen that the term 'education systems' has broader meanings, including both the education system itself and other elements. For the purposes of this chapter, I will choose the third category and focus on the HE system and governance. The term 'HE systems' will include both the HE system and the governance.

2.1 HE Systems in Australia

According to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), Australia (2018), there are three types of HEIs in Australia: public HEIs, private HEIs, and other approved HEIs. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the public HEIs. In 2018, there were 38 public HEIs in Australia (DESE, 2018).

The internal governance model of Australian public HEIs can be divided into two types: 'two parties' and 'three pillars'. The 'two parties' refer to the HEI council or senate, the highest administration power, and the academic committee or council, the highest academic power. The 'three pillars' include the highest decision-making body, the highest academic governance body, and the highest executive body'. The highest decision-making body of the HEI is the HEI council or senate. The president is the honorary chairman of the council. His or her main responsibility is to represent the HEI by attending external meetings and by issuing internal graduation certificates. The highest academic governance body is the academic committee or council. The executive team, represented by the vice-president, has the highest executive power to implement decisions made by the HEI council or senate (Hu & Wang, 2019).

HE in Australia has undergone profound changes since the 1980s. HE is no longer regarded as a public good, but as a market. During this change process, the role of participants in Australian HE activities has also changed: students and parents have become consumers, teachers and academic staff have become producers, and education administrators have become managers and entrepreneurs (Marginson, 1997). Since the 2000s, service delivered to the students have become an important part of the strategic planning of HEI development (Fang, 2005). Australian HEIs apply a marketing logic to guide their development in which students are a prerequisite for the survival and development of the HEI (Zhang & Zhang, 2016). The declined budgets to HEIs in Australia add to institutional pressures to diversify income, increasing international student fees (Welch, 2017), and academic performance has increasingly become characterized by a managerial audit culture (Martin-Sardesai & Guthrie, 2021).Australian universities emphasise corporate operation and ensure that the concept of 'efficient management' is deeply rooted in the minds of their staff (Fang, 2005; Si & Hou, 2012). The principles of 'performance-based management' are incorporated into staff evaluation, job promotion, rewards and salaries (Si & Hou, 2012). Resource allocation is carefully calculated. Each faculty has financial autonomy and implements its own accounting. Each member of a faculty has a clear sense of responsibility and a resource allocation. Tasks are linked to funds. When there are tasks, there are funds, and when there are funds, the corresponding tasks must be completed. The faculty thus uses its funds to control the operation of the faculty and its personnel (Han et al., 2009).

2.2 HE Systems in China

China has the largest and most diversified HE system in the world. Currently, there are four types of HEI in China: institutions providing postgraduate programmes, regular HEIs, adult HEIs and non-governmental HEIs. They are mainly administrated by two bodies: Central Ministries and Agencies and the Local Authorities. The first three types are public HEIs, while the last are private HEIs (Education Statistics, 2021b). For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on public HEIs, especially on regular HEIs. As mentioned in Chapter Two, By 30th September 2021, there were 2,756 regular HEIs in China, including 1,270 HEIs offering degree programmes and 1,486 higher vocational colleges (Education Statistics, 2021a). Of the HEIs offering degree programmes, 114 are administrated under Central Ministries and Agencies, and 1,156 are administrated under Local Authorities (Education Statistics, 2021b). In this chapter, I focus on HEIs offering degree programmes and administrated by the Local Authorities. They account for 91% of all HEIs offering degree programmes in mainland China.

There are two logics for resource allocation for HEI internal governance: one is a planned logic, and the other is a market logic. Traditionally, resource allocation in Chinese HEIs is planned logic. The whole HEI resource is like a cake where the HEI divides the cake into pieces and allocates resources to faculties. As a result, every faculty complains that there is a lack of teaching and research facilities. If the resource allocation follows the planned logic, the resources will always be inadequate. Shifting from a planned logic to a market logic involves a revolution in resource allocation (Zhou, 2020). Local HEIs could use resources to guide the various faculties to shape their own developmental paths and goals. When resources are divided according to the faculties' real needs, it will reduce any waste of resources (Lin & Li, 2018).

As Chinese HEIs are accustomed to 'planned logic' and have become used to following their superior's instructions, it limits their using initiative and innovation in HEIs and leads to an unsatisfactory situation in HEI planning: First, HEI leaders have little awareness of HEI planning. Second, there is a lack of multiple stakeholders. Third, the content of the HEI planning is insufficient. Lastly, the implementation of HEI planning is inadequate (Zhai, 2019). Furthermore, the complexity of the power distribution between political power, administration power, academic power and democratic power may weaken or even distort the original intention of the HEI planning. It can easily transform the strategy planning process into a game where every mood is watched (Chen, 2012).

In recent years, the Chinese government has put a great deal of effort into undergraduate education and talent cultivation. The most important policy is *On Accelerating the Construction of High-level Undergraduate Education and Comprehensively Improving Talent Cultivation Ability* (MoE, 2018). This policy title is shortened to the *Chinese HE 40 articles*. It has extensively re-constructed undergraduate education. For instance, Article 12 strengthens learning process management and motivates students to study actively and hard. Article 37 strengthens the responsibility of HEIs and requires HEI leaders to see undergraduate education as their job responsibility

(MoE, 2018). This policy has re-formulated HEI leaders' understanding of talent cultivation, which will be discussed further in a section of the findings.

Sun (2018) points out that the legislation supporting Chinese HEIs has been lagging behind, that current laws and regulations are out of line with society and there is lack of observation, reflection and guidance affecting practice. Recent policy is a response to these problems. For instance, the policy *Guidelines on Further Strengthening Legislation Work in HEIs* (MoE, 2020) provides ten guidelines. One of these guidelines involves improving HEIs' prevention of legal risks and a control system.

3 Methodology

This section presents the methodological approaches of the study. I used several Australian leadership development programmes to study their perceived impact on leaders' understanding of Australian and Chinese HE systems. My data collection included interviews and learning reports. The data analysis involved thematic analysis.

3.1 The Australian Leadership Development Programmes

The Australian leadership development programmes are part of the overseas leadership development programmes. From 2012 to 2018, a total of 268 Chinese HEI leaders attended 12 leadership development programmes in Australia. Those programmes were mainly offered by seven Australian HEIs. The average number of participants in each programme was around 22. Of the 12 programmes, 11 of them shared the theme 'University Development Planning and Resource Allocation', designed for university chairmen and presidents, while the theme for the final one was 'University Teaching and Talent Training', designed for the directors of academic affairs. The former was organized by the NAEA and the latter by the CEAIE.

3.2 Data Collection

The data for this chapter include six individual interviews and four learning reports. Purpose sampling was utilized to collect the data. The participants had attended one of the Australian leadership development programmes on the theme 'University Development Planning and Resource Allocation' between 2013 and 2017. Between May and December 2018, face-to-face interviews were conducted with six participants in their home institutions. The timing of the interviews was appropriate, since

the participants had completed the programme a good while before (from one to five years earlier).

Each interview lasted approximately 30–70 min. The participants shared their perspectives in a professional manner. All the interviews were conducted in Chinese, as both the researchers and the participants are native Chinese speakers. During the interviews, the researchers also asked for other types of data. Four participants shared their learning reports (compulsory homework required by the NAEA) with the author.

There were five males and one female HEI leader (aged 46–55, see Table 1). Each participant represented one HEI. At the time of data collection, two of the participants served as vice presidents, one as vice chairman and president, one as chairman, one as president, and one as general accountant. All the participants had travelled abroad earlier, and half of them had visited Australia prior to the leadership development. I provide three reasons for this choice: First, the participants represent similar provincial HEIs in the central and western regions of China, all administrated by Chinese provincial governments. They all belonged to HEIs offering degree programmes and non-elite HEIs in China. Second, they had experienced the same programme theme: 'University Teaching and Talent Training'. Of the six participants, two had been in the same group in 2015, and another two had been in the same group in 2017. Finally, they had some knowledge of Western (including Australian) HE systems. Half of them had visited abroad more than once, and half of them had visited Australia earlier.

Table 1 Profile of the participants, data and coding (Australian programmes)

No	Role	Main responsibilities	Gender	Programme time	Interview	Learning report	Coding
1	Chairman	Communist Party Branch leader	Male	2013	Yes	Yes	C-2
2	Chief accountant	Finance & audit	Male	2014	Yes	Yes	CA
3	President	Administration	Male	2015	Yes	Yes	P-3
4	Vice chairman and vice president	Personnel & teacher union	Female	2015	Yes	N/A	VCP
5	Vice president	Library & further education	Male	2017	Yes	N/A	VP-2
6	Vice president	Planning, infrastructure & logistics	Male	2017	Yes	Yes	VP-3

Note: (1) The role refers to the role held at the time of interviewing; (2) The role of chief accountant is the equivalent of the vice president

Ethical issues were carefully considered throughout the study. Before the interviews, the researchers asked every participant to sign a consent form to confirm their voluntary participation. Five participants agreed that their interviews could be recorded, but one did not agree to the recording. Therefore, the author took detailed notes during that interview. After the interviews, the author transcribed the data in Chinese and sent the transcriptions to the participants to make comments. The transcriptions were properly saved on a password-protected computer. During data reporting, the author used code names to safeguard the identities of participants.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data were analysed according to emerging themes and categories. Data analysis took the form of thematic analysis whereby themes and patterns are identified, analysed and reported (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A three-step data analysis process was followed. First, a vertical analysis was applied in which each participant's interview and learning report was analysed separately to identify their critical experiences. Initial coding of themes emerged and they were categorised around the research questions. Second, the data were analysed and sorted according to themes. Finally, the themes that had emerged from the data were re-examined and divided into two groups: (1) physical and social environment, and (2) university governance. The quotes were translated from Chinese into English by the author.

4 Findings and Discussion

This section presents findings related to the participants' perceptions of the Australian leadership development programmes and their understanding of differences in the HE systems of Australia and China.

The participants first shared their general impressions of the Australian leadership development programmes. C-2 commented, 'The learning is fruitful and the impact is significant.' P-3 wrote in his learning report, 'The leadership development has broadened my horizon, updated my concepts, clarified my future direction, and strengthened my confidence. All of these have doubled my confidence in doing future innovative work.' VP-3 wrote, 'In this world, there is no major or subject on being an HEI president. From a scholar to a HEI president, I am completely self-taught. It is difficult to govern an HEI, especially an HEI in western China. The design of the MoE's programmes is a response to this problem. I have learnt about the HE systems in Australia from multiple perspectives.'

4.1 Physical and Social Environment

All the participants enjoyed the physical and social environment at the Australian HEIs, including the learning environment and the service system.

First, the participants perceived the learning environment as relaxed. They reported that the university buildings were modern and that learning materials were up to date at Australian HEIs. The design of the buildings and facilities are 'humanized'. These features create a relaxed learning environment. VP-2 commented, 'The library is very comfortable and there are carpets are on the floor. Students can read, write, sleep, and even have a relationship there.' P-3 gave an example:

> What impressed me most was the library system. It is very modern, luxurious, and clean. The corridors are big and there are many sofas along the sides. These are called informal learning spaces…In my HEI, the building corridors are too small to put sofas there. You have to stand in the corridor while visiting a staff member's office. (P-3, interview)

As a leader who also teaches bachelor students in his HEI, VP-3 understands the needs of both teachers and students. He highlighted that the biggest difference is the 'ideas difference'. In Australia, teaching activities determine the equipment and environment; in China, it is the opposite. He was excited to show pictures of the building at the Business School at SUT to the author during the interview:

> The building looks peculiar and weird! It is full of innovation and imagination. Inside the building, there are many different shapes and fully-equipped rooms for classes and meetings. The oval classroom enables every student to participate in the class. The design of the wooden wall is well-spaced. Such a learning environment is excellent! The HEI buildings in China look like matchboxes or slightly changed matchboxes. The classroom tables and chairs are in rows and connected with each other. Even if you make a slight move, the chair will make noise. Imagining how much noise that will make in one class with 60 students? Such a noise will disturb the students' concentration and reduce their learning outcomes. (VP-3, interview)

The findings confirmed previous studies that informal learning spaces in Australian HEIs provide students with relaxed, free and convenient learning conditions (Si & Hou, 2012). The design and layout of facilities is quiet, comfortable, open and orderly, which creates an interactive and mutually-helpful learning environment (Han et al., 2009). Australian HEIs are equipped with multi-functional buildings, personalized classrooms and modern libraries (Zhang & Zhang, 2016). This can be explained by Brubacher's (2001) explanation of the meaning of free learning: students have the freedom to decide what to learn, when to learn, how to learn, and they create their own ideas.

The second aspect discussed concerned the student service system. The participants reported that Australian HEIs put students at the centre, respect the students and care about their rights and interests. The HEIs they visited have comprehensive student service systems, including teaching services, career guidance, psychological counselling and extracurricular activities.

These findings are consistent with studies showing that 'student-oriented' involves real action and is not just a slogan in Australian HEIs (Han et al., 2009). The student

affairs function is very comprehensive and detailed (Si & Hou, 2012), and services for teachers and students at the University of Adelaide are sincere and caring (He, 2015). One explanation for this is that, following market logic, students are seen as the prerequisite for the survival and development of the HEI (Zhang & Zhang, 2016).

4.2 HEI Governance

The participants compared university governance in Australia and in China, including the university mission and planning, resource allocation, talent cultivation, and legalization.

All the participants commented that a university's mission and planning are significant aspects of university governance. They made specific comments on how the Australian leadership development programmes had improved their understanding of university mission and planning. For example, VCP commented that 'The president directly formulates university planning and the cooperation among different units is smooth in Australian HEIs'. VP-2 echoed that 'The university planning is specific. I will suggest my university formulates a 10-year university plan and makes the goals specific for different stages'. The participants also pointed out the defects of university mission and planning in China. CA commented, 'In China, university mission lacks long-term considerations, it is divorced from the practical work, and it changes with any change in the HEI leaders. This leads to little operability or guidance.' CA shared a similar view in his report:

> What impressed me most is the university's mission and planning. During the visit, I could frequently see and hear expressions of mission, vision and purposes at the Sydney University of Technology, the University of Adelaide and at the University of New South Wales. To achieve their mission, these HEIs formulate a 10-year development plan. The tasks and goals are specific, democratic, and measurable. During the lectures, the professors reference their HEI mission and show a high degree of recognition of that mission. It seems that everyone is familiar with the HEI mission and keeps it in mind… In China, the emphasis on HEI mission and planning is insufficient. The content of the HEI plan is big but empty. The mission lacks distinct characteristics. (CA, learning report)

The findings support previous studies showing that Australian HEIs use scientific planning to guide and promote HEI reforms and development (Han et al., 2009). HEI planning is widely accepted and has become a common understanding among staff (Li, 2004). This is also in line with He's (2015) study showing that the University of Adelaide's continuous development and growth is largely due to its equal emphasis on the formulation and implementation of strategic planning. In Chinese HEIs, strategic planning is more like a form or symbol: in the actual implementation, the action is completely different from the planning. This can be explained by the planned logic in Chinese HEIs, which is seen to be holding back the formulation and implementation of HEI planning (Zhai, 2019). It is also due to the complexity of the power distribution between political power, administrative power, academic power, and democratic

power, which may weaken or even distort the original intention of the HEI planning (Chen, 2012).

The participants also commented that resource allocation is vital to HEI governance. They found that Australian HEIs are becoming more entrepreneurial and internationalised, while Chinese HEIs lack global awareness, efficiency, openness, and an information infrastructure. They considered that the concept of an 'operating HEI' would be a good lesson for Chinese HEIs. CA compared the resource allocation model of Australian and Chinese HEIs:

> Australian HEIs pay equal attention to input and output. Resource allocation is widely affected by globalization, marketization, and informatization…. They have a streamlined and efficient administrative system. For instance, every staff member has a certain allocation for printing documents and is required to print double-sided…. In Chinese HEIs, there is a little awareness of cost-efficiency, there is duplication and serious waste, resulting in insufficient utilization of resources. For example, a laboratory in one HEI will not be open to another. In particular, HEIs from the western regions have the dilemma of being 'poor yet generous'. (CA, interview and learning report)

The findings confirm studies showing that resource allocation in Australian HEIs is market logic related (Zhang & Zhang, 2016). This approach emphasises corporate operation, efficiency and competition (Fang, 2005; Si & Hou, 2012), autonomy and responsibility for resource allocation (Han et al., 2009), while in Chinese HEIs, the resource allocation is by planned logic, and resources are always scarce (Zhou, 2020).

VP-3 compared the information infrastructure in Australian and Chinese HEIs:

> Australian HEIs consider information infrastructure as the 'oxygen' and invest lots of money and personnel in it. The core information governance system at the University of Adelaide is 'My Uni', where you can find almost all the materials about teaching, research, and services. With one account, students can pay the tuition fee, register for courses, take exams, give feedback, and more …. In many Chinese HEIs, the information infrastructure is isolated across different units. You need to have many accounts to log into the different systems, which do not access each other. (VP-3, interview and learning report)

These findings are in accord with other studies showing that the University of Adelaide invests heavily in strengthening its hardware and software construction of cloud services and in building an information platform for learning and management (He, 2015; Zhang & Zhang, 2016). It has adopted online learning as the core strategy for transforming teaching methods and establishing the core competitiveness of the university (Zhang & Zhang, 2016).

The participants also reported that the programme had firmed up their belief in putting the cultivation of talents at the core of the university. C-2 commented that 'all the work is for talent cultivation and this is our original aspiration'. VCP echoed this and emphasized that 'every HEI leader should seriously consider what kinds of talents can we cultivate for the nation?' VP-3 stressed that 'all that we are doing is for serving the students and teachers, including the logistics'. Two participants stated that quality assurance of teaching is very high in Australian HEIs. Students work hard to pass their courses and get their degrees; otherwise, they must pay high tuition fees to re-take the courses. As VP-2 put it:

> 'Loose enrolment and strict graduation' is a basic principle in Australian HEIs. Many students cannot graduate as scheduled. Compared with Australian HEIs, the graduation requirement for Chinese HEIs is lower. This makes some students lazy. The children of my friends are studying in one Australian HEI, and they get warnings on their academic performance. It will give them a lesson to study hard. (VP-2, interview)

This finding is partly supported by previous research showing that the Australian government plays a very powerful role in the quality assurance of HE (Zhang & Zhang, 2016). The University of Adelaide provides high-quality courses for students to choose from (He, 2015), the content of the teaching in Australian HEIs emphasizes the development of students' talents and respects their interests and choices (Zou, 2008), while the course examination pays special attention to the cultivation of students' innovation and creativity and promotes the students' ability in self-analysis and problem-solving (Han et al., 2009).

The participants commented that legalization is an important mechanism by which to guarantee smooth HEI governance. They stated that the Chinese HEI is an unlimited liability university and carries endless responsibilities, which are endowed by the society and parents. P-3 gave an example:

> I asked the lecturer: How does the Australian HEI deal with students' suicide? The answer was simple: call a policeman and the students' parents…If the same thing happens in Chinese HEIs, it will be like an earthquake…. The idea of caring for a disadvantaged group makes it impossible for an HEI to safeguard its legal rights. The HEI just spends money to buy safety. There is a big gap in the level of legalization between Australian and Chinese HEIs. (P-3, interview)

This finding is in line with Sun's (2018) claim that the construction of legislation has lagged behind in Chinese HEIs. The corresponding solution is reflected in the MoE's recent policy stating that the government will promote the establishment of a third-party mediation system, HEI liability insurance, comprehensive safety insurance, accident and injury insurance and other insurance systems that can improve the prevention, handling and risk sharing mechanisms for personal injury and accident disputes (MoE, 2020).

5   Conclusion

This chapter has studied Chinese HEI leaders' perceptions of Australian leadership development programmes as related to their understanding of Australian and Chinese HE systems. These perceptions are based on several Australian leadership development programmes rather than just one. The participants considered the physical and social environment and HEI governance as the two major aspects around which to construct their understanding of the two HE systems.

The findings confirm previous studies on trainees' perceptions of Australian HE systems and add new knowledge to an understanding of the status of governance in Chinese HEIs offering degree programmes. The diverse leadership development programmes provided an opportunity to capture the 'big picture' of the participants'

understandings. I argue that the Australian leadership development programmes serve as a platform for Chinese HEI leaders to construct their understanding of the HE systems in both Australia and China. Such an understanding will affect their future work. As VCP said, 'The leadership development is like planting a seed in my mind. I will always consider using this seed to improve my work'.

In conclusion, the Australian leadership development programmes had a positive impact on the Chinese HEI leaders' understanding of Australian and Chinese HE systems. It is recommended that the perceived impact on the Chinese HEI leaders' leadership practices be studied in the future. In other words, what kinds of leadership practice did the Chinese leaders execute after completing the Australian leadership development programmes? What kind of challenges did they face during those implementations and why? Such efforts will help us to understand better what Australian leadership development programmes can offer to Chinese HEI leaders and what they cannot.

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