Is it possible to get 100% at university? The flaws of the UK grading system and their impacts on media assessments

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Abstract

There are two marking scales running in parallel in the UK higher education system: one is the honours-class, and the other, the percentages from zero to 100. The consequence of this double standard is the adoption of a hybrid scale that impairs the performance assessment, as students' marks rarely break the range of 80 in Humanities and other soft-sciences. The problem is accentuated in Journalism and Media areas, where the assessment criteria are often subjective. This article uses a mixed-methods approach based on the critical incident technique to discuss why this flaw exists. This study also offers a cross-cultural analysis to understand the consequences of using a deformed grading scale. It also critically approaches the subjectivity of evaluations and the international portability of the degrees based on the British honours systems.

Keywords: Assessment, internationalisation, degree portability, criterion-referencing, constructive alignment

Articles

Introduction

Among the hardest academic duties is the need to measure students' achievements and translate their performances into a number to represent the achievements of the learning outcomes in a coursework, a module or a programme. It is even harder if the marking criteria is subjective, as is common in Journalism and Media related subjects.

In the UK, this process is especially difficult as two different grading systems coexist with distinct rules, not always interchangeable. Firstly, the country follows its traditional honour-class system, broadly recognised by the industry in the UK. The system ranks the successful students' performance in four different categories: third-class honours (40 to 49%), second-lower class (50 to 59%), second-upper class (60 to 69%), and first-class honours (above 70%). The second grading system running in parallel is more refined and internationally recognisable, offering a percentage range that, officially, progresses arithmetically from 0 to 100. However, this full range of marks is not commonly used in Humanities and other *soft-sciences* (Cole, 2003), and it is often limited by the application of the honours scale.

This article focuses on Journalism undergraduate programmes and uses a combination of methods to explore the impacts of this shortened scale and the flaws of presenting the students with subjective marking criteria. This critical approach (Muncle, 2006) considers a cross-cultural debate and uses the incident technique to 'create a functional description of an activity' (Borgen et al., 2008, p. 158). In this case, it refers to the observation of the marking process and its undisclosed rules in journalism education.

As a starting point, this study found evidence of these unwritten rules. It used a combination of observations and students' testimonials posted to a public digital forum - The Student Room - that defines itself as 'the largest student community in the world' (TSR). In this specific forum, 106 answers were posted in response to the question 'Is it possible to get 100% at uni?' (TSR, 2010), as it will be detailed.

This critical reflection also discusses the subjective language used to describe the marking criteria and the lack of a constructive alignment in some Journalism assessments. To conclude, it offers a cross-cultural analysis to illustrate the consequences of using a flawed grading scale.

Assessment and marking disarray

Assessment is a critical component of the educational process, as it 'tells students what is valued and what they need to achieve to be successful in their studies' (Carless, 2015, p. 9). Diagnosis, feedback and standards are the main reasons to assess the students in order to verify their progress, reinforce learning, certify achievement, maintain quality, and predict future performance, among other functions (Reece et al., 2006) and it is intrinsically connected to marking. Postman (2011) suggests that the use of numbers or symbols to quantify someone's behaviours is embedded in the modern society in a way that its essence shapes educators and other practitioners' behaviour. It is exactly this mathematical understanding that puts the assessment in a difficult situation: to stick to its essence, as a derivation of a pure science, it implies the necessity of clear and objective criteria and, overall, the ability of being reproduced within a clear mathematical scale. However, more subjective approaches are frequently adopted to measure the students' performance (Kolen and Brennan, 2004).

Ideally, criterion-referenced assessment should determine what students know and can do in relation to a well-defined domain of knowledge and skills, rather than in relation to other students (Hambleton and Li, 2005). Scores must be interpreted in relation to a set of performance standards. Biggs and Tang (2011, p. 108) highlight the importance of constructively aligning the learning outcomes of modules with teaching and assessment in order to provide a 'supportive learning system' for students. This process of constructive alignment, however, is more challenging when the learning outcomes in many journalism modules ask for the learners to accomplish tasks to *professional, publishable* or *industry standards*.

The highlighted terms are vague and can be ambiguous, as journalistic content that is professionally published can vary greatly in composition, content, format and quality. Using such terminology to describe the learning outcomes of practice-based modules and assignments is not always in the best interest of the students but rather a shortcut to maintain the validated programme's documentation aligned to the quickly evolving media landscape. It transfers the interpretation of what *professional*, *publishable* or to *industry standards* mean to the tutor, leaving an opening to justify any subjective marking.

It shows that constructive alignment and criterion-referencing (Jervis and Jervis, 2005) have advantages but the reliability can be compromised by personal judgements if the marking criteria uses subjective language. In theory, true criterion-referencing would only allow for specific understandings but Sadler (2005) believes that, even where detailed criteria are used 'the fundamental judgments teachers make about the quality of student work remain subjective and substantially hidden from the students' view'. His belief echoes the thoughts of Delandshere (2001, p. 121) who claims that the perspectives of assessors are 'rarely explicit or public, and hence, not open for scrutiny or discussion'. In short, objectivity in grading is almost a fallacy and it gets worse if the marking criteria is subjective.

Managing the subjectivity

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education sets frameworks that, in theory, enable the 'comparability of academic standards, especially in the European context; support international competitiveness; and facilitate student and graduate mobility' (QAA, 2014, p. 5). The descriptors define different standards for each level (Moon, 2003). They are not directly connected to professional standards but to the developmental process at a specific educational level. As levels are hierarchical, the work of a level 4 student should demand a lower level of complexity than the requirements for a level 5 student within the same programme. For that reason, describing the outcomes as *professional, publishable* or to *industry standards* is clearly imprecise.

According to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, the process of assessment 'must be designed and carried out in such a way that it is effective in enabling students to demonstrate their achievement of the intended learning outcomes (or the extent of that achievement)' (QAA, 2014). To comply with it, one can assume that a full achievement needs to be demonstrated within the expectations for a specific level, not compared to a standard that is outside the scope and abilities of an ongoing learning process.

In theory, marking criteria could bring clarity to subjective terms used on official documentation, but as Knight (2002, p. 280) argues, marking criteria are commonly created to assess the demonstration of 'fuzzy learning outcomes', and only have a meaning in local communities of practice. Sadler (2005) suggests that the focus in higher education should be on standards rather than criteria but it only opens the debate about the set of standards the students should follow, as the range of practices in the industry differ broadly.

Universities across the UK try to avoid discrepancies in assessments by hiring external examiners to verify the reliability of the marking. However, marking is not consistent and assessment criteria has multiple limitations (Bloxham et al., 2016), and 'the virtues of double-marking as a check on standards are not as clear-cut as some believe' (Yorke, 2011, p. 256). The widespread unspoken rules of using a shorter range of scores are commonly reproduced by the external examiners as they use it in their own home institutions, perpetuating the practice in a vicious circle. At the end, what happens in Media and Journalism schools, in reality, is not as straightforward as the academics would like to believe, because the measurement of performances 'is not a matter of counting marks but of making holistic judgments' (Biggs, 2003, p. 6).

Uninterchangeable systems

There is a second complicator to Journalism and Media students in the UK on top of not having a precise definition of assessment standards. Most universities in the country adopt the official marking range from 0 to 100, with 40 being the minimum pass mark at undergraduate level. In addition to this scale, in the UK, 'successful candidates in honours degree examinations are placed in different classes according to their performance, first class being the highest' – ranked with 70 or above, followed by Class II - Division 1 (60 to 69); Class II - Division 2 (50 to 59); Class III (40 – 49) (Kogan, 2015, p. 34). In theory, each one of the honours classes would represent an alternative grade description: Class 1 for A; Class II – Division 1, popularly named as 2:1, for B; Class II – Division 2, the 2:2, for C; and Class III for D (Ellet, 2015).

The problem resides around the unspoken rules of marking, intrinsically connected to the British university culture, as will be discussed. The range of marks routinely adopted rarely positions the grading curve within the 100 available points: it is restricted to something between 35 and 75, eventually, going from 30 to 80. The contrast between the praxis and the official rules is so evident that even documents from 'the national body which champions teaching excellence' (HEA, 2017) reveals it. In a report discussing a pilot project for the introduction of the Grade Point Average (GPA) system, the conversion table shows no differentiation for the marking above 75 percent - considering it all as an A+ - despite the 25 possible marks

above that line. It reveals a discrepancy from the arithmetical progression in relation to the other scales. It also does not offer different grades for the values under 29 percent (HEA, 2014).

Discrepancies

These unofficial rules that define a shorter range of grades seem to be accepted with no questions among the lecturers but they are also a common sense among the students. As mentioned before, 106 answers were posted to the question 'Is it possible to get 100% at uni?' (TSR, 2010). After a non-reactive content analysis (Neuman, 2007, p. 227), 68 responses were computed as valid for the sample (not being emojis, excluding non-related comments or replies from the author of the question). Out of them, 48 (70.58 percent of the valid answers) said that is not possible to achieve a 100 at university; 16 (23.52 percent) offered a partial concordance, always mentioning it is possible only in areas such as Maths, Statistics or Physics, multiple choices examinations or, in Humanities, only in grammar exams; only four (5.88 percent) suggested that it is possible to achieve full marks. In this case, the respondents mentioned that they achieved those marks when the coursework assessed was a technical laboratory report or when they went beyond the requirements for a specific essay.

The unspoken rule that limits the range of marks can be clearly grasped in comments such as: 'Getting over 75 percent in an essay subject is very difficult. Over 80 percent is near unheard of'; 'It gets progressively harder to obtain the mark passed around 65 percent. Subsequently, by the time you're in the mid 70's, it's near impossible to progress further without writing material that is potentially publishable'. In this case, it demonstrates the marking criteria is misaligned with the learning outcomes for a specific level. 'So if you fulfil all the requirements, you generally get given a mark around the 80s as there's no set percentage for what you'd assume a 90 percent or 100 percent essay would be'. However, there are discouraging statements that exemplify the students' disbelief in a fair marking: 'In a humanities subject, it's not even virtually impossible, it's completely impossible' (TSR, 2010).

As noted by the students, in Maths, Physics, Statistics and other sciences that fall into the hard-pure-non-life classification (Biglan, 1973), where raw scores are more frequent, or where the criterion-referencing does not leave place for much subjectivity, the disparity on using the full range is not so evident and it is confirmed by a higher number of first honours degrees in comparison to other subjects (Yorke et al., 2000; Brint et al., 2012). However, the discrepancy should not occur, as all subjects are regulated by the same rules, and the full range must be applied in the same way. In fact, it does not happen. 'How can a judgement be made regarding the relative equity of grading in different subjects when there appear to be different marking traditions that have to be added to the epistemological differences between the subjects themselves?' (Yorke et al., 2000).

The subjectivity of marking in Journalism and Media seems to create a threshold for students' achievements above a certain grade. The main concern caused by it is not about the chances to achieve a first-class degree (Yorke, 2017). The problem is the disarray in using the full range added to the subjectivity of the marking criteria and what this means for the students to produce *professional, publishable* or *industry standard* work in order to be graded with a 100.

In fact, there are unanswered questions in the UK, especially if the commonly accepted practices in higher education are observed from a cross-cultural perspective: what happened after 70? Which are the criteria to distribute 31 marks within a first-class honours? What are the implications of neglecting the use of all the 100 available marks?

Criticism to the honours' classes

Criticisms towards a current honour system that is 'no longer fit for purpose' (Sabur, 2015) are increasing (Yorke, 2017). The dissatisfaction is leading to the search for a solution that provides a better representation of the actual learning performances. One of the suggestions is moving towards the American system, the grade point average (GPA), that 'provides students with a more precise grade' (Shaw, 2015), by having a cumulative performance that varies from F- to A+ (FC, 2017a). The irony is that the official percentage system in place already allows such differentiations if used independently, disconnected from the honours classification.

However, when overlaying the two systems (0 to 100 and honours), it is not possible to contemplate a continual arithmetic ruler of marks, with a similar value within each one of the honours classes. The ruler has distinct segments with different values that contain the mark range for each specific honours classification *(see Figure 1)*. From that perspective, in the UK, it is possible to suggest that the marking process will occur in three different moments (Ebel and Cunningham, 2017). First, by the examiner roughly determining if the assessment is a pass or a fail. Second, and almost concomitantly, the assessment's grade is placed within an honours' segment: a third, a 2:2, a 2:1, and a first-class.

The third step refines the position of the student's work within the specific honours' segment. It will be mentally recognised by the lecturer as weak, medium or good within that range and it will be assigned a place in one of the extremities or in the middle of the segment, receiving a numerical representation in a scale from 0 to 9. For example: the examiner identifies a piece of work that is a pass, they consider that represents a 2:1, but a relatively weak example. In this case, the marks will be something between 60 and 63. A medium quality work in the 2:1 range, will be marked as 64 to 66. A good 2:1 will receive above 67. This process seems to be widely adopted and culturally accepted in the UK.
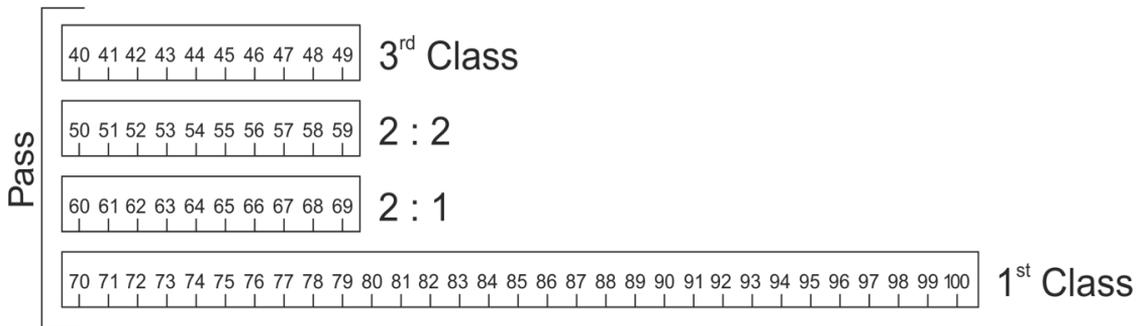

Figure 1. The distribution of the marks is not a continuous ruler but a series of classification segments

Based on that, one can observe that the tutors are comfortable to mark the students within segments containing a 10-mark range. The big marking discrepancy starts after the examiner decides that the work being assessed is a first-class. In that segment, comprising 31 possible marks from 70, what happens is a repetition of the progression used for the 10-mark segments. This arithmetical calculation helps to explain why the summative assessments rarely receive marks above 80 in Journalism and Media subjects. Inside that segment, the refinement does not follow the same elasticity. A low first will be marked between 70 and 73. A medium, from 75 to 76. A good one rarely will pass the barrier of the 80, because the lecturers are not used to calibrating the gap between the marks available within the first-class segment, and still mark the students in that category with the same grade distribution as they do in the other classifications.

To ensure a fair grading, the progression should respect the same distribution logic above the 70 within the first-class honour range. If compared to each mark awarded from 40 to 70, the equivalent progression above 70 would be around three marks *(see Figure 2)*. A fair marking system will provide the same positioning within the segment as happens in the other classes (Ebel and Cunningham, 2017). For instance, within the range of the first-class distribution, a relatively weaker piece of work will be marked from 70 to 79. A medium quality piece with the first-class attributes will range from 80 to 89. The very best first-class work will be marked above 90, until reaching the most outstanding 100, representing not the perfection but the full achievement of non-subjective learning outcomes.

Figure 2. Recalibrating the elasticity within the first-class segment

This necessary debate is still not receiving the required attention. A pilot using GPA marking implemented in the UK suggests a higher motivation and engagement from the students, as the grades reflect performance more precisely, ensuring a differentiation b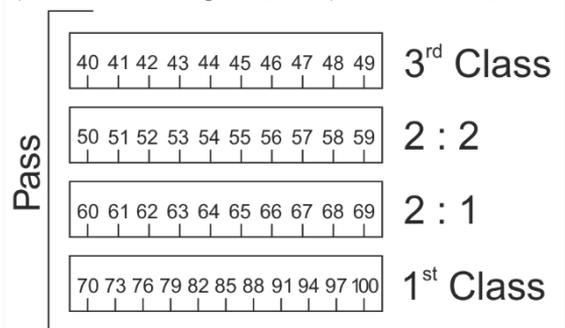etween one learner that has a 60 from another that has a 69 (Shaw, 2015). If an improving system can be beneficial to better describe performances as it helps to differentiate the achievements within one honours class (the equivalent of ten marks), it seems it

would be even more beneficial for the larger gaps, such as the one currently in use to generalise different performances as a first-class honours (31 marks, from 70 to 100).

At the same time, on the other end of the scale, the definition of the pass mark of 40 also needs to be more detailed. In a system that, officially, has 100 possible marks to be awarded, 'it may be difficult to justify awarding a pass where the candidate achieves less than half the learning outcomes' (Karran, 2005, p. 11). If compared to other international systems (Study in Europe, 2017), the requirements in the UK do not seem challenging enough.

International perspectives

The inconsistency of marking and the lack of using the full range of grades affects the honours distinctions across subjects (Hornby, 2003). At the same time, the discrepancies of fitting the grading curve into a shorter range affects British students looking to continue their studies abroad as the honours scheme has no parallels in most foreign cultures (Nuffic, 2015). By neglecting the full range of grades to accommodate the marking within cultural practices, unofficially aligned the honours scheme, British universities inflict a poorer grade conversion on their students in relation to the grades obtained in countries that traditionally use the full range (Lounes; TSR, 2010; Mendes, 2014).

It is understandable that health, social and political uncertainties could interfere with student mobility in the future but, so far, more than 200 thousand British students have benefited from the Erasmus exchange programme, including a period at a university abroad as part of the under or post-graduate curricula (Black, 2017). In total, 70 percent of the mobility takes place in Europe, with France (25 percent), Spain (17 percent) and Germany (9 percent) as the favourite destinations for Britons (Boe et al., 2015) – countries that do not adopt or directly recognise the honours classification scheme used in the UK.

In France, the grading system goes from 0 to 20. The equivalent of an A is awarded for marks from 16 to 18, and a A+ for above 18 (Univ-Lille, 2017). The country faces a similar misuse of the full range of grades as the one observed in the UK. 'Even though professors grade on a scale of 20, the highest possible grade is 17 in most cases. In reality, the highest grade will be a 14, and 12 and 13 are considered excellent grades' (Lounes, 2017). THF - Très Honorable avec Felicitations du Jury (Highly Honourable with Praise) grades, referring to marks from 18 to 20, are 'relatively rare' (FC, 2017b).

England			France			Germany			Spain		
Scale	Equi-valent	Per-centage	Scale	Equi-valent	Per-centage	Scale	Equiva-lent	Percen-tage	Scale	Equiva-lent	Per-centage
100	A	100	20	A	100	1.0	A	90-100	10	A	100
90	A	90	19	A		1.3	A	85-89	9	A	90
80	A	80	18	A	80 +	1.7	B	82-84	8	B	80
70	A	70	17	A		2.0	B	79-81	7	C	70
60	B	60	16	B	70	2.3	B	75-78	6	D	60
50	C	50	15	B		2.7	C	72-74	5	E	50
40	D	40	14	B		3.0	C	69-71	4	F	40
30	F	30	13	C	60	3.3	C	65-68	3	F	
20	F	20	12	C	55	3.7	D	60-64	2	F	
10	F	10	11	E	50	4.0	D	50-59	1	F	
			10	E	40	4.3	F	49 -	0	F	
			9	F		4.7	F				
			8 - 0	F	30 -	5.0	F				
Table sources: University of Greenwich (UoG, 2017); Study in Europe (2017); University of Bonn (2017)											

Table 1. The marking scale and the equivalents in the popular destinations for UK students

Articles

In Germany, the marking scale goes from 5 to 1, with 1 being the best possible achievement (HS-KL, 2017). Average grades starting with 1 (1.0, 1.3, 1.7) are quite common (Quora, 2014). In fact, higher grades seem to be more often applied in Social Sciences and Humanities – essay-based, in general – than in pure sciences, where exams – including oral tests – are more common (Academia, 2014). Spanish universities use a marking system from 0 to 10, 10 being the equivalent of a 100 percent of achievement (Uni Granada, 2017) and using the full range is a common practice (Chacón, 2015).

The conversion dilemma

As seen, the marking scales and systems vary largely across European countries and, in some cases, even from one institution to another within the same country. The conversion systems in place are not flawless (Karran, 2005). *Table 1* illustrates the score that the student needs to achieve for the equivalent of an A – or a first-class honours - in terms of percentage, in three different countries. In the UK, any mark from 70 will be translated into an A. In France, where the full range is also not used, the student should get 75 or above for the same A. In Germany, where the full range is broadly applied, an A is the translation for marks above 85 percent. In Spain, the same concept is assigned only for the students achieving above 90 percent. It is clear that a pure mathematical conversion will be rather unfair. By removing the cultural aspects of the marking, the students interested in translating grades obtained in the UK will be at a disadvantage.

Two real cases observed by the authors in previous teaching experiences help to understand the discrepancies. The examples express one possible conversion between grades obtained in Germany and the UK but in fact, there is no common sense (FC; Uni Queen Mary; Gov.uk, 2017; Study in Europe, 2017; Uni Bristol, 2017).

The first situation shows an inflation of the grades during conversion from a mark obtained in Germany to the UK. In this specific situation, a British undergraduate Media student was enrolled in a German institution for a semester abroad and was marked with a 2.7 for an essay. In the German institution it is the equivalent of a C+. However, in the German scale, the C+ represents the equivalent of 72 percent to 74 percent, which when translated to the British system will be interpreted as an A (first-class honours). The same grade, that probably would have left a German student disappointed, when re-signified in a different cultural context, was effusively celebrated by the British undergraduate.

The second case showed the opposite and involved a student who graduated in the UK with a first-class degree (with an average mark of 76) in BA (Hons) Journalism. The student was interested in an international masters in Media Studies in Germany (in English and with no tuition fees). The electronic application form, that triggers the selection process, required the student to input the grading data and the conversion of the grades was done automatically, from a pure mathematical perspective. The form had a field requiring the student to input the maximum possible mark for the country of origin (in the UK, officially a 100) and the minimum pass mark (40). Based on that, the first honours degree, with an average of 76 was converted to the German scale as a 2.2, the equivalent of a B- ('Grade calculator', 2017), as algorithms interpret the equivalent only as a mathematical operation, not as a subjective system connected to local cultural values. The score was not enough to allow the student to proceed with the application (that accepted only graduates with the equivalent of an A or B+), causing unnecessary stress and disappointment for a high-performing student.

Conclusion

There are two serious disarrays in the way that British universities evaluate students in Journalism and Media programmes. One is subject related, as the wording used to describe learning outcomes and consequently the marking criteria is subjective and open to interpretations that suggest unattainable performances. In many cases, the misalignment prevents students from being objectively evaluated against realistic standards. The use of definitions such as *professional*, *publishable* or *industry standards* are in disarray with good practices, as the students can be evaluated in relation to standards that are beyond the learning outcomes for a specific level.

The second problem is a wider spread practice in British academia: the cultural habit of not using the full range of marks (0-100) due to the juxtaposition of uninterchangeable marking systems, where two grading scales run in parallel. One is represented by the traditional honours classes, that roughly divides perfor-

mance in four passing categories, identifying anything marked with a 70 or above as a first-class honours. The second one is more refined and portable, assigning a percentage value in a scale from 0 to 100. In an attempt to combine both, academics tend to shrink the marking range from 30 to 80, damaging the numerical representation of the student's performance, especially in Humanities and other *soft-sciences*, where the learners perceive it to be virtually impossible to achieve the mythical 100. The full-scale range needs to undergo a recalibration to ensure the same elasticity across the available marks. It must be done because by neglecting use of the full range, academics deprive students' competitiveness outside the UK borders, going against the higher education internationalisation frameworks.

The implications of having one broad mark range (0 to 100) and adopting an unofficial smaller version (30 to 80) connected to unrealistic and subjective learning outcomes and marking criteria descriptors go far beyond the classroom. It affects the student stimulus, the quality indicators, the good practice, and the internationalisation of Journalism and Media programmes. The British honours system needs to undergo a revision to restate its validity (or not). The existence of two parallel marking systems in the UK must be questioned and the measures require a mobilisation of the sector and the engagement of the authorities.

Nevertheless, there are changes that are unpinned to the political scenario. The quality assurance needs to start with the careful description of the learning outcomes and the appliance of a constructive alignment through every validation process. The requirements to achieve those learning outcomes must be translated with precise and objective marking criteria. The marking process itself must be done by objectively comparing the performance to the learning outcomes, enabling the students to be awarded the full range of marks. The British higher education sector, especially within Journalism and Media schools, must remove its cultural bias in assessment to prevent students from graduating with grades that do not reflect their real performances in a multicultural scenario.

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