

Reimagining Higher Education in Nepal: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

Nepal's higher education system faces persistent structural and systemic barriers such as inadequate governance, limited research capacity, inequities in access, and misalignment with labour market demands-despite recent reform efforts and growing enrolment. This study aims to evaluate current reforms and identify strategic interventions that can enhance quality, equity, and relevance in Nepal's higher education sector. Employing qualitative policy analysis, the research integrates a critical review of national educational policy documents, scholarly literature, and comparative global trends. The findings indicate that initiatives including digitalisation, decentralisation, and expansion of technical and vocational education have been initiated but remain disjointed and inconsistently implemented. Key reform needs identified are strengthening institutional autonomy and quality assurance systems, aligning academic curricula with market needs, fostering research and innovation culture, and leveraging digital technologies to modernise teaching and governance. The study concludes with evidence-based policy recommendations designed to guide Nepal's transition to an inclusive, competency-based, future-ready higher education model.

Keywords: *higher education reform; education policy; quality assurance; digital transformation*

Introduction

Higher education serves as a cornerstone for national development by fostering human capital, driving innovation, and enhancing global competitiveness. It is not only instrumental in equipping individuals with advanced knowledge and skills but also in shaping democratic values, fostering civic responsibility, and supporting socio-economic transformation. For a developing country like Nepal, higher education is particularly significant as it holds the potential to catalyze inclusive growth, reduce poverty, and empower marginalized communities.

Nepal stands at a unique demographic advantage, with over 60% of its population under the age of 30 (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2020). This youthful demographic presents both an opportunity and a challenge. On one hand, it offers a window of opportunity for economic transformation through an educated and skilled workforce. On the other hand, the

pressure to provide accessible, high-quality, and relevant higher education to a rapidly growing student population is intensifying.

Despite considerable expansion in the number of higher education institutions over the past two decades, Nepal's higher education system continues to face several structural and operational challenges. These include outdated curricula, insufficient funding, inadequate infrastructure, limited research capacity, low employability of graduates, and persistent brain drain. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST, 2019) acknowledges that "the relevance and quality of higher education have remained questionable due to the lack of clear linkages between academia and the labor market." Additionally, the politicization of university governance and disruptions caused by student unions have undermined academic freedom and institutional autonomy (World Bank, 2022).

In response to these issues, national education policies and reforms have been initiated, such as the National Education Policy 2019, which emphasizes curriculum modernization, ICT integration, quality assurance mechanisms, and autonomy in university governance MoEST (2019). Furthermore, the Higher Education Reforms Project (HERP), supported by the World Bank, has aimed to improve equity, access, and efficiency within the system. However, as noted in a policy review by the University Grants Commission UGC (2023), "systemic inertia, inconsistent implementation, and inadequate funding continue to slow the pace of meaningful reform."

Despite growth in the number of universities and student enrollments, Nepal's higher education system is still plagued by structural deficiencies. These include outdated curricula, inadequate research culture, weak governance, underfunded institutions, and misalignment with labor market demands. According to Former Minister of Education, Giriraj Mani Pokharel (2020):

"We cannot afford to expand higher education at the cost of quality. The transformation of higher education must go hand-in-hand with a solid framework for relevance, research, and responsiveness to national needs." The Kathmandu Post (2020)

Similarly, current educational leadership has expressed concern about the disconnect between university education and employment outcomes. Speaking at the launch of the National Education Policy 2019, then-Minister of Education, Science and Technology, Krishna Gopal Shrestha, emphasized:

"Higher education should produce graduates who can innovate, solve problems, and contribute to national development, not merely chase degrees." MoEST,(2019). In 2022, during a policy consultation session, the Ministry's Secretary Ram Prasad Thapaliya noted: "Our universities must develop institutional autonomy and accountability. Excessive political interference has compromised academic standards, and we need strong leadership to restore credibility in the sector." UGC Consultation Proceedings (2022)

At the same time, the global higher education landscape is being reshaped by emerging trends such as digital learning, international collaboration, and a shift toward competency-based education, which Nepal must strategically adapt to. According to educational expert Dr. Lekh Nath Poudel, "Nepal cannot afford to lag behind in the global knowledge economy; we must reimagine higher education as a flexible, inclusive, and innovation-driven system" Poudel (2022).

This article seeks to analyze the current state of higher education in Nepal through a comprehensive review of its challenges, emerging opportunities, and policy initiatives. By

integrating insights from academic literature, policy documents, and global trends, the paper proposes a forward-looking vision for reforming the sector. It emphasizes the need for innovation, equity, and quality assurance to ensure that higher education in Nepal can fulfill its transformative potential in the decades to come.

Research Objectives

1. To identify key structural and systemic challenges in Nepal's higher education system.
2. To assess the effectiveness of recent higher education reform initiatives.
3. To propose strategic policy recommendations for building an inclusive, competency-based, and future-oriented higher education model.

Literature Review

The higher education sector in Nepal has attracted significant scholarly and policy attention, with numerous studies highlighting persistent systemic challenges that impede its growth, quality, and relevance. While Nepal's higher education system has made strides in expanding access over recent decades, there is widespread consensus that comprehensive reforms are urgently needed to align institutional goals with national development priorities and evolving global standards of quality and innovation.

Curriculum Relevance and Skills Mismatch

A prominent concern across recent literature is the outdated and rigid nature of curricula in Nepalese universities. Khanal and Ghimire (2021) and the World Bank (2021) emphasize that many academic programs remain predominantly theoretical, lacking sufficient integration of practical skills and experiential learning. This curricular misalignment results in a significant skills gap between graduates and labor market demands. Employers report that graduates often lack critical competencies such as problem-solving, communication, and technical skills essential for participation in knowledge-driven economies (World Bank, 2021).

This mismatch has tangible socio-economic consequences. The Nepal National Employment Report (2020) indicated that approximately 30% of university graduates were either unemployed or engaged in jobs unrelated to their field of study, reflecting the systemic failure to produce work-ready graduates. This issue not only limits youth employment prospects but also undermines broader national development objectives.

To address this challenge, the literature widely advocates for curriculum reforms emphasizing competency-based education, stronger industry linkages, entrepreneurship education, and flexible, interdisciplinary program designs that can rapidly respond to global trends (Khanal & Ghimire, 2021; World Bank, 2021).

Governance and Institutional Autonomy

Governance challenges constitute another critical barrier to higher education quality in Nepal. Thapa (2020) details how politicization, particularly through student unions affiliated with political parties, disrupts academic operations, causing frequent strikes and administrative paralysis. Such disruptions delay academic calendars, erode institutional autonomy, and weaken meritocratic principles crucial for academic excellence. Political interference also diminishes faculty motivation and professionalism by undermining merit-based recruitment and promotion systems, thus stalling the development of a robust academic culture that fosters research, innovation, and student engagement (Thapa, 2020).

In response, the government and international partners have initiated reforms under the Higher Education Reform Project (HERP), which aims to decentralize governance, empower institutional leaders, and strengthen accountability and quality assurance mechanisms (HERP

Progress Report, 2023). Early reports indicate gradual improvements, though political resistance and institutional inertia remain significant challenges.

Research and Innovation Capacity

Nepal's higher education sector faces chronic underinvestment in research infrastructure and weak incentives for faculty research, limiting its capacity to contribute to knowledge creation and innovation (Paudel, 2019). Compared to regional peers, Nepalese universities have lower research output and fewer collaborative projects, which constrains their competitiveness. Strengthening research capacity requires increased government and donor funding, establishment of dedicated research centers, merit-based incentives for faculty, and fostering academic-industry partnerships and international collaborations (HERP Progress Report, 2023; Paudel, 2019).

Alignment with Global Trends and Lifelong Learning

International organizations such as UNESCO (2022) highlight the misalignment between Nepal's higher education offerings and global economic shifts. Lifelong learning, equity, and digital transformation are increasingly prioritized in global education reform agendas (UNESCO, 2022).

Globally, higher education is rapidly shifting toward student-centered, competency-based education and digital learning platforms (Altbach & de Wit, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital adoption in Nepalese universities but exposed significant infrastructural and capacity gaps, including limited internet access and inadequate digital literacy among faculty and students (UNESCO, 2022). Addressing these gaps is critical for equitable access and quality enhancement.

Emerging Opportunities and Reform Pathways

Despite ongoing challenges, positive developments provide grounds for cautious optimism. The expansion of private higher education institutions has introduced program diversification and industry linkages, while the growth of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) addresses practical skills shortages (HERP Progress Report, 2023). International collaborations have begun to foster research partnerships and academic exchanges, providing exposure to global best practices.

Together, these trends suggest Nepal's higher education system is gradually moving toward greater inclusivity, quality, and relevance, though sustained policy commitment and investment are necessary to realize this potential fully.

While the literature offers extensive insight into discrete aspects of Nepal's higher education challenges-such as curriculum misalignment, political interference, and research capacity deficits-it lacks integrative analyses that examine how these factors interrelate within a systemic framework of reform. Furthermore, empirical studies assessing the implementation and impact of recent reform initiatives like HERP at the institutional and student levels remain scarce. Additionally, there is limited research exploring the long-term effects of rapid digital transformation post-COVID-19 on educational equity, pedagogical quality, and institutional readiness in Nepal. Addressing these gaps through comprehensive, multidisciplinary research is crucial to developing evidence-based strategies for transforming Nepal's higher education into a resilient, innovative, and globally competitive system.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two interrelated theoretical perspectives: Human Capital Theory and the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm in education. Human Capital Theory, as articulated by Schultz (1961) and Becker (1993), posits that investment in education enhances the productivity and employability of individuals, thereby contributing to national economic

development. In the context of Nepal, this theory underscores the importance of aligning higher education with labor market needs to address graduate unemployment and underemployment. The misalignment between curricula and practical skills, as identified by Khanal and Ghimire (2021), illustrates a failure to optimize educational outcomes for both individuals and the economy.

The New Public Management (NPM) framework informs the governance dimension of this study. NPM advocates for greater efficiency, accountability, and autonomy within public institutions, including higher education. Applied to the Nepalese context, this perspective supports the argument for institutional reforms that reduce political interference, decentralize decision-making, and enhance performance-based management Thapa (2020). This approach is particularly relevant in assessing the governance challenges documented in the literature and in shaping recommendations for systemic reform.

Together, these theories provide a lens through which the study critically analyzes the effectiveness, relevance, and governance of Nepal's higher education sector, and frames the strategic imperatives for reform.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, document-based research methodology to analyze the current challenges and emerging opportunities within Nepal's higher education sector. Given the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of the issues involved, a qualitative approach facilitated a comprehensive synthesis of diverse perspectives from policy documents, research articles, and international reports. National policy documents and reform project reports (e.g., Higher Education Reform Project reports, Ministry of Education strategic plans, etc.) were considered for the prior data in the study. Moreover, peer-reviewed academic studies, reports from international organizations such as UNESCO, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, OECD, articles and official document of the government, etc. were the secondary sources to collect data on Nepalese higher education.

However, a thematic content analysis was conducted to identify and categorize key themes across the four domains of challenges—quality and curriculum relevance, governance and political interference, brain drain, and infrastructure and funding gaps as well as the emerging opportunities including digital learning, international collaboration, TVET, and private sector growth. The study particularly emphasizes recent post-pandemic changes and the effects of global trends such as digitalization and internationalization, integrating contemporary findings from 2020–2023 literature. Attention was paid to discrepancies between policy intentions and ground realities. While comprehensive, this research is limited by reliance on secondary data. Future empirical studies involving field interviews with university administrators, faculty, students, and policymakers are necessary to deepen understanding of implementation challenges and lived experiences.

Result and Discussion

Quality and Curriculum Relevance

The analysis affirms that **curriculum stagnation** remains a fundamental challenge in Nepalese higher education, despite growing recognition of its detrimental impact on graduate employability. Consistent with Khanal and Ghimire (2021) and the World Bank (2021), curricula continue to prioritize rote memorization and theoretical knowledge over practical skills, critical thinking, and digital literacy. This mismatch has become even more pronounced in light of rapid technological advancements and the digital economy.

Recent studies (e.g., Sharma & Adhikari, 2023; UNESCO, 2022) emphasize the critical need for outcome-based education (OBE) frameworks that align academic programs with real-world competencies, particularly in emerging fields like data science, AI, environmental sustainability, and entrepreneurship. The pandemic-induced acceleration of digital transformation also highlights the urgency to embed blended learning models and interactive pedagogy.

Industry reports reveal persistent gaps in industry-academia collaboration, which undermines students' exposure to internships, applied research, and innovation projects. Strategic reforms must thus foster partnerships to co-develop curricula, ensure labor market responsiveness, and enhance experiential learning opportunities.

Governance and Political Interference

The entrenched political interference identified by Thapa (2020) continues to erode academic freedom and institutional autonomy. This study's findings corroborate ongoing disruption through politically motivated strikes and governance instability, which harm academic calendars, faculty motivation, and institutional credibility. Post-2020 policy frameworks, including HERP (2023), have taken steps toward decentralizing governance and strengthening accountability. Establishing autonomous governing boards with multi-stakeholder representation—academia, industry, civil society—is widely advocated to depoliticize decision-making and enhance transparency.

Brain Drain

The brain drain phenomenon has intensified, exacerbated by domestic education system limitations and more attractive international prospects for Nepalese students (Shrestha & Bhattarai, 2022). Data indicate that significant proportions of Nepali students studying abroad do not return, citing better career opportunities, research facilities, and political stability overseas. This outflow undermines national capacity in critical sectors such as healthcare, engineering, and education. While remittances offer short-term economic relief, the long-term loss of human capital calls for strategic interventions to improve domestic research infrastructure, career pathways, and incentives for returning graduates. Recent literature highlights the potential of diaspora engagement programs to reverse brain drain effects by fostering knowledge transfer, research collaboration, and investment from Nepali professionals abroad.

Infrastructure and Funding Gaps

Persistent underinvestment in physical and digital infrastructure constrains teaching quality and research productivity, particularly outside urban centers. The COVID-19 crisis exposed and deepened digital divides due to inadequate internet connectivity and lack of digital literacy among faculty and students (UNESCO, 2022; Adhikari, 2023). Public universities remain financially dependent on limited government subsidies, restricting investment in laboratories, libraries, and technology upgrades. The widespread use of part-time or contract faculty, often with limited research capacity, further affects institutional stability and mentoring quality. Contemporary policy analyses stress the urgent need to diversify funding sources, including private sector partnerships, research grants, and international development aid, to build sustainable institutional capacity.

Emerging Opportunities and Strategic Directions

Despite these challenges, the sector exhibits encouraging signs of digital innovation, internationalization, and private sector engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for adopting digital platforms such as MeroSchool and MOOCs, enabling flexible learning even in remote areas. However, success depends on bridging digital literacy gaps and infrastructure

investment to ensure equitable access. Growing international academic collaborations offer opportunities for faculty exchange, joint research, and exposure to global best practices. These partnerships can enhance curriculum relevance and institutional visibility. The rise of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) addresses skills mismatches and youth unemployment by focusing on demand-driven practical skills aligned with Nepal's economic needs. Expansion of the private higher education sector, while raising concerns about quality control, injects diversity, innovation, and additional capacity into the system.

Integrated Reform Agenda

The synthesis underscores that fragmented or isolated reforms will be insufficient. A holistic, coordinated strategy is critical, incorporating curriculum modernization, faculty development, governance depoliticization, research investment, digital infrastructure, and equitable access. Multi-stakeholder collaboration involving government bodies, universities, private sector, civil society, and international donors is essential to create a resilient, inclusive, and globally competitive higher education ecosystem in Nepal.

Current Challenges in Higher Education

Despite notable expansion in the number of higher education institutions and increased enrollment over the past two decades, Nepal's higher education system continues to grapple with multiple deep-rooted and interrelated challenges. These issues affect the quality, equity, and effectiveness of higher education, limiting its ability to contribute meaningfully to national development. This section outlines four major areas of concern:

Quality and Curriculum Relevance

One of the most persistent challenges facing higher education in Nepal is the lack of curriculum modernization. Many academic programs across public universities are based on syllabi that have not been significantly revised for years. These curricula often place a heavy emphasis on theoretical knowledge and rote learning, while giving minimal attention to practical, hands-on experience, critical thinking, interdisciplinary learning, or emerging global skills such as digital literacy, problem-solving, and communication.

As a result, graduates frequently find themselves ill-prepared for the evolving demands of the domestic and international labor markets. Employers often report that university graduates lack basic job-readiness skills, a gap that reflects weak industry-academia linkages and limited emphasis on experiential learning such as internships, case studies, or capstone projects. Furthermore, the pace at which technological and societal changes are occurring—especially in areas like information technology, health sciences, and environmental studies—demands more agile and responsive academic programming, which remains largely absent.

Political Interference

Nepal's university system has long been subject to political influence, which undermines academic integrity, decision-making autonomy, and institutional stability. Political parties maintain active involvement in student unions, faculty associations, and even university appointments. As a result, university campuses often become battlegrounds for political agendas rather than spaces for scholarly inquiry and educational advancement. Frequent strikes (locally termed *bandhs*), class boycotts, and politically motivated protests disrupt academic calendars and negatively impact both teaching and learning outcomes. The politicization extends into faculty hiring and promotions, which can sometimes be influenced more by party loyalty than by merit or academic credentials. This undermines morale, erodes trust in the system, and contributes to a culture of patronage and inefficiency. The broader impact of political interference is a weakened

institutional governance structure, where long-term academic planning and innovation are often sidelined in favor of short-term political considerations.

Brain Drain

Nepal faces a serious brain drain problem, with thousands of students leaving the country each year to pursue higher education abroad—primarily in countries such as Australia, the United States, India, and the United Kingdom. According to government and educational consultancy data, a substantial portion of these students choose not to return after graduation, citing better career prospects, higher wages, and more stable political environments abroad. This outflow represents a significant loss of human capital at a time when Nepal requires skilled professionals to support economic growth, technological innovation, and public sector reform. The root causes of this trend include dissatisfaction with the domestic education system, perceived lack of opportunities for career advancement, and weak research and development environments. Although remittances from the diaspora contribute significantly to Nepal's economy, the long-term implications of brain drain—particularly in sectors like healthcare, engineering, and academia—are detrimental to national development.

Infrastructure and Funding Gaps

The physical and institutional infrastructure of Nepal's higher education sector remains underdeveloped, particularly in public universities. Laboratories, libraries, and teaching facilities are often outdated or inadequately equipped, hindering the delivery of quality education. In many institutions, especially those located outside the Kathmandu Valley, students lack access to essential academic resources, reliable internet, and modern learning environments.

Furthermore, funding for higher education is both limited and unevenly distributed. Public universities rely heavily on government subsidies, which are often insufficient to cover operational costs, let alone investments in research, faculty development, or technological upgrades. Financial constraints also affect hiring practices, resulting in a shortage of qualified full-time faculty. Many universities rely on part-time or contract lecturers, which limits faculty availability for mentoring, research collaboration, and institutional development.

These infrastructure and funding gaps directly impact student learning outcomes, faculty productivity, and the overall competitiveness of Nepalese universities on a regional and global scale.

Emerging Opportunities

Despite significant challenges, Nepal's higher education sector also presents promising opportunities for transformation. These are shaped by technological advancement, shifting educational demands, global integration, and policy reforms. Leveraging these opportunities could help the country realign its higher education system with national development goals and global standards.

Digital Learning Platforms

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a powerful catalyst for the digitalization of education in Nepal. With physical classrooms closed for extended periods, educational institutions were compelled to adopt online learning solutions. Platforms such as MeroSchool, e-Pustakalaya, and various Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) became essential tools for delivering content remotely.

This shift, while initially reactive, has opened new avenues for blended and lifelong learning, especially in remote and underserved regions. Digital platforms offer flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and scalability, enabling access to a broader demographic of learners. Moreover, they can support personalized learning experiences, interactive content, and self-paced study—

elements that are often missing in traditional classroom settings. However, to fully harness this potential, issues such as internet connectivity, digital literacy, and content localization must be systematically addressed.

International Collaboration

Academic globalization presents an important opportunity for Nepalese institutions to engage in international collaborations through student exchanges, joint degree programs, faculty mobility, and collaborative research. Several Nepali universities have initiated partnerships with institutions in countries like India, China, Australia, and the United States, expanding opportunities for knowledge sharing and cultural exchange.

Such collaborations can help enhance the quality of instruction, research capacity, and institutional visibility. Exposure to global best practices and diversified pedagogies also contributes to curriculum improvement and student preparedness for international careers. Moreover, international engagement helps align Nepalese institutions with global accreditation standards and benchmarks.

Technical and Vocational Education

There is a growing recognition of the value of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in addressing Nepal's youth unemployment and underemployment. Programs focusing on practical skills in areas such as hospitality, information technology, agriculture, and construction are gaining traction, particularly among students seeking quicker pathways to employment. Supported by both public initiatives and donor-funded projects, TVET is increasingly being integrated into mainstream education through polytechnic institutions, vocational schools, and community colleges. This shift represents a movement away from the traditional academic model toward a demand-driven, skills-oriented approach, which is vital for Nepal's economic diversification and inclusive development.

Private Sector Growth

The rapid expansion of the private education sector in Nepal has contributed to increased access, improved infrastructure, and greater program diversity. Private colleges and universities—particularly those affiliated with foreign institutions—often offer more contemporary curricula, updated teaching methods, and better student services than many public counterparts. This trend also encourages healthy competition, pushing public institutions to improve their standards. While concerns about commercialization and regulatory oversight persist, the private sector's role in filling capacity and innovation gaps cannot be overlooked. With appropriate policy frameworks, private institutions can become key stakeholders in the modernization of higher education in Nepal.

Strategic Directions for Reform

Transforming Nepal's higher education system into a more effective, inclusive, and future-ready sector requires deliberate and sustained reform efforts. The following strategic priorities are essential:

Curriculum Modernization

There is an urgent need to transition from content-heavy, examination-focused curricula to outcome-based education (OBE) models that emphasize skills, critical thinking, and real-world application. Curriculum development must involve continuous feedback from industry stakeholders, alumni, and labor market studies to ensure relevance. This also includes the integration of interdisciplinary studies, entrepreneurship, and emerging fields such as data science, environmental studies, and artificial intelligence.

Faculty Development

The quality of teaching and research is closely tied to the professional development of faculty. Institutions should implement mandatory training programs focused on pedagogy, digital tools, research methods, and ethics. Faculty exchange programs, research grants, and performance-based incentives can also help improve motivation and output. Establishing a national center for academic excellence and faculty development could systematize these efforts.

Governance and Autonomy

Depoliticizing university governance is fundamental to improving institutional performance. Establishing autonomous and accountable governing boards with representation from academia, industry, and civil society can enhance transparency, reduce political interference, and enable more strategic decision-making. Legal and policy frameworks should support institutional autonomy while ensuring public accountability and regulatory compliance.

Research and Innovation

To build a knowledge-based economy, Nepal must invest in research infrastructure and innovation ecosystems. This includes setting up dedicated research centers in priority sectors like agriculture, climate change, health sciences, and information technology. Encouraging public-private research partnerships, increasing research funding, and creating pathways for commercialization of university research are key elements of this strategy.

Equitable Access

Ensuring equity and inclusion in higher education remains a critical challenge. Marginalized communities, women, and students from remote regions continue to face barriers to access and success. Reforms should focus on expanding scholarships, providing remedial support, building inclusive campuses, and promoting gender-sensitive policies. The development of regional higher education hubs can also help decentralize opportunities and reduce disparities between urban and rural areas.

Conclusion

Nepal's higher education system stands at a pivotal juncture, shaped by competing forces of tradition, modernization, and globalization. The challenges are undeniable—ranging from outdated curricula and politicized governance to infrastructure deficits and talent migration. However, the sector also holds tremendous promise, driven by a youthful population, technological advancement, expanding private participation, and increasing global engagement. To unlock this potential, a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach is essential. Policymakers must enact and implement forward-looking reforms; institutions must strive for academic excellence and responsiveness; and the private sector, civil society, and international partners must play active roles in supporting innovation and capacity-building.

By embracing a reform agenda rooted in quality, equity, innovation, and relevance, Nepal can position its higher education system not only as a driver of national development but also as a contributor to regional and global knowledge economies.

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