

# **REPORT**

## **Governing Access: A Four Country Comparison**

Hosted by  
CHET (Centre for Higher Education Transformation)



Victoria Junction Hotel,  
V&A Waterfront, Cape Town  
2-3 March 2006

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of the seminar, *'Governing Access: A Four Country Comparison'*, was to present the project foundations and preliminary enquiries of an ongoing cross-country research initiative that seeks to shed light on the way in which the central governments in four countries – Portugal (PT), Czech Republic (CZ), South Africa (SA) and Norway (NO) - steer access to higher education. Some of the research questions underlying the study are:

- Why is the government involved in access to higher education - knowledge society, human capital, social agenda?
- How is access to higher education organised/regulated – mechanisms / instruments?
- What are the “outcomes” of access regulation?

On the evening of March the 2<sup>nd</sup>, Alberto Amaral (PT) and Peter Maassen (NO) addressed the dinner guests and explained the rationale for the current project. Amaral stressed the importance of understanding access from a comparative perspective, as well as the important role played by governmental policies and measures. Maassen clarified the project scope and limitations, and shed light on the qualitative reasons for selecting the four case studies. Maassen also contextualised the initial political and social moments which led to the first wave of expansion of higher education. These comments prepared the ground for the discussion that would follow the next day.

On March the 3<sup>rd</sup>, team members from each of the four countries addressed the audience, briefly outlining the most important drivers of the initial expansion of their respective domestic higher education systems, as well as the main policy mechanisms used to 'steer' the process. The speakers included Antonio Magalhães (PT), Helena Sebková (CZ), Ian Bunting (SA) and Rómulo Pinheiro (NO). After the presentations, Nico Cloete (SA) summarised the main cross-cutting themes and prepared the ground for an open discussion. The text below provides a brief summary of the major points (per speaker/country-case), as well as the core issues raised by the participants at the seminar. (See Appendix 1 for more details about the seminar programme, and Appendix 2 for the list of participants.)

## 2. The Portuguese Case - Antonio Magalhães (CIPES)

Magalhães began his presentation by explaining that the 1974 democratic overthrow of the Salazar fascist regime had been the main driver for 'opening up' the higher education system to previously excluded student groups. Between 1974 and 1976 student enrolments increased by approximately 26%. The period 1976 to 1986 was characterised as a 'normalisation period' which reflected broad developments across the European region. Magalhães stressed that from a policy standpoint, the three main governmental goals were:

- To expand and diversify the system by implementing a binary system (of universities and polytechnics) and allowing the emergence of the private sub-sector
- To increase the institutional autonomy of the public sector, particularly universities, and

- To regulate the size of the higher education system via access policies.

Following advice from the World Bank, from 1976 to 1997 the Portuguese government shifted its focus from 'equity' to 'efficiency' by restraining enrolment quotas, rationalising the supply of higher education, and improving the management of the system. The first private institutions emerged at the beginning of the 1980s. By the end of the decade, this sub-sector had grown exponentially as a result of the lowering of student entry requirements for Portuguese higher education by the Ministry of Education. In approximately a decade the number of private enrolments (as a percentage of total enrolments) rose from 10% to 35%. The decade 1990 to 2000 saw further exponential growth in student numbers (+106%), which led to what the project team described as "more is a problem". As a consequence, during the mid 1990s a strategic shift occurred, from 'uncontrolled growth' to 'increase quality' at the system level. Pass and national examinations at the upper secondary levels (grades 10 to 12) were implemented, and institutions were allowed (and encouraged) to set minimum access requirements.

Currently, the main challenges in Portuguese higher education include: (a) a gradual decline in the number of candidates owing to the demographic profile of the population; (b) a consistent increase in the number of student vacancies in the public sector; (c) new legislation (since 2005/06) across the higher education sector enforcing minimum marks in the national access examinations; and, (d) the abolition of 35 study programmes (in 2003/04) and the reduction in the number of available student vacancies owing to low enrolment rates (i.e. unpopular fields). Furthermore, the Portuguese system is struggling to cope with a set of 'hot issues', namely: the low efficiency of institutions and the system as a whole; low quality of provision in some areas, e.g. private sector; fiercer competition for students; and, excessive concentration in certain study fields (e.g. the health sciences, to the detriment of areas such as education, the social sciences, commerce and law).

### **3. The Czech Republican Case - Helena Sebková (CHES)**

Sebková began her presentation by providing a brief overview of the domestic higher education landscape which comprises 25 public institutions (275 000 students), 2 state institutions (4 000 students), and 40 private institutions (19 000 students). Sebková stressed that whereas non-university institutional types offer mostly bachelor/undergraduate degrees, university-type institutions offer programmes across the spectrum, i.e. bachelor, masters and doctoral qualifications. In 2004, new higher education enrolments totalled 72 000 students, of which 40% were in the 19-year-old age cohort. With regard to exclusion from the system - an underestimated phenomenon until recent times - the key factors (in 2003) included families' educational background and the type of secondary education attended (i.e. grammar, professional and/or vocational). Gender imbalances are not present. On the capacity side, Sebková said that demand is greater than supply ("more is a problem") with 40% of all applicants left out of the system. It is noteworthy that fluctuations do occur in fields of study where 'market demands', 'low unemployment rates', and 'international comparisons' are key driving forces.

Sebková indicated that the growth in student numbers (massification) led to concerns around *quality*. This resulted in the establishment of an independent body (the 'Accreditation Commission') which is responsible for the official accreditation of all study programmes. As far as funding is concerned, unlike private institutions, public institutions are entitled to state (public) subsidies. Similarly, while private institutions

charge their students tuition fees, there are no fees at public institutions and students benefit from publicly-sponsored accommodation and boarding. With regard to global pressures, Sebková outlined the impacts of the Bologna process (European region) at three main levels: Firstly, a positive contribution brought about by the 3+2+3 degree structure in terms of programme design, student enrolments, and completion rates; secondly, enhanced quality throughout the system; and, thirdly, problems related to the recognition of degrees. In the Czech Republic, the relationship between the state and higher education institutions is characterised by institutional autonomy regarding the number of accepted students (in individual programmes). However, the capacity of the public system is a direct function of the amount of state funding made available to institutions on an annual basis. (This did not apply to the private sector.)

Concluding her presentation, Sebková highlighted three important contemporary factors affecting the higher education system as a whole:

1. Low unemployment rates amongst graduates
2. Weak influence of the labour market on program offerings, and
3. The lack of state steering in certain study fields, i.e. “more is still required”.

#### **4. The South African Case - Ian Bunting (Department of Education)**

##### **1. First Phase: “More is Better”**

In the first post-apartheid phase (1994 to 1999), policy discussions accepted that the achievement of equity in higher education in South Africa would be possible only if the system was encouraged to grow rapidly. This growth, it was accepted further, would have to be primarily in African student numbers, because while Africans comprise more than 70% of the total population, they make up less than 50% of total higher education enrolments. The notion underpinning this phase was that “more is better” as far as higher education access policies were concerned.

The first major policy report in this period was the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) which was presented to President Nelson Mandela in 1996. The NCHE accepted the “more is better” view, and argued that massification was the most appropriate mechanism for achieving equity in South African higher education. The NCHE argued that the South African higher education system could be regarded as a massified one when its gross participation rate reached 30%. The gross participation rate was only 15% in 1995.

Government’s response to the NCHE report was contained in the 1997 White Paper, “A Strategy for the Transformation of Higher Education in South Africa”. The White Paper accepted that growth in the higher education system was essential for the achievement of equity. The White Paper did not, however, accept the NCHE recommendations on the massification of the higher education system. The White Paper argued that massification could not be afforded given the state of the South African economy in the first years after apartheid. According to the White Paper, maintaining the financial sustainability of the higher education system and eliminating apartheid inefficiencies were fundamental preconditions for the achievement of equity goals.

Towards the end of the 1990s the concerns about the effects of massification on the financial sustainability of the South African higher education system receded. The economy improved, but more importantly the expected increase in student

enrolments did not occur. The number of students enrolled in the public higher education system in 1999 was in fact lower than that in 1996 - the year in which the NCHE report was published. It appeared then that higher education enrolments would grow only when the South African school system had fully recovered from the damage done to it by the apartheid system.

## **2. Second Phase: “More is not Better”**

During 1999 and 2000, failed expectations about enrolment growth changed the thrust of higher education policies. Policies became directed more towards inefficiencies and ways of improving the outputs of public higher education institutions. These policy shifts were captured in a National Plan for Higher Education which was approved by the South African cabinet and published in early 2001.

Between 2001 and 2004, when student enrolments in the public higher education system grew rapidly (and quite unexpectedly), this policy phase began to change. Having increased at an average annual rate of only 0.6% between 1995 and 2000, enrolments accelerated to an average annual rate of 6.1% between 2000 and 2004. The total increase in enrolments in 2004 compared to 2000 was 156 000 (or 27%).

This rapid growth in enrolments again raised the issue of financial sustainability. Because the funds government made available for higher education were linked to inflation and not to student growth, between 2000 and 2004 the value of the government subsidy per student unit fell in real terms. Institutions began to suffer severe financial strains, and the national Department of Education became increasingly concerned about the effects that unfunded student growth was having on institutional performance and, in particular, on the quality of academic programme offerings.

By 2004, the Department of Education had concluded that in the prevailing circumstances of student growth, “more was not better”. It decided that until government funding levels could be improved, and institutional capacities enhanced, restraints should be placed on student growth in public higher education. Upper limits (or caps) should be placed on the total number of students to be funded annually by government - in the system as a whole and in each institution. The placing of these limits on enrolments, the Department hoped, would improve the finances of the system and, at the same time, encourage improvements in quality and efficiency.

## **3. Third phase: “More but Different”**

The attempts by the Department of Education to cap student enrolments have proved to be controversial, primarily because they have been seen to be an “anti-equity” move. There is still a general view in the South African higher education system that equity can only be achieved if the public higher education system is permitted to grow at reasonably rapid rates.

The Department of Education will have to accept that the capping of student enrolments is too blunt an instrument to be employed in a system that is committed to racial and gender equity. The Department will probably move to a new phase of policy in which it accepts the notion of “more but different”. This will require the Department to move more firmly towards the 1997 White Paper’s goal of a differentiated higher education system. The Department can do this because, in terms of South Africa’s Higher Education Act, the Minister of Education has the power to determine the “shape and size” of the public and private higher education

systems. The Minister can achieve differentiation in the public higher education system by approving different institutional missions, strategic goals, academic programme mixes, and target totals of student enrolments. The Minister could ensure that future enrolment growth occurs only in those institutions which have the required capacity, and whose output performance is likely to continue to be good.

## 5. The Norwegian Case - Rómulo Pinheiro (University of Oslo/Hedda)

Romulo Pinheiro began his presentation by highlighting the periods of student growth (first wave) in the Norwegian context. In particular, between 1960 and 1976 there was a quadruple increase in student numbers, while 1975 to 1987 was period of stability, although enrolments in the college sector doubled. It was at the beginning of the 1990s that the expansion of the system went into its second wave. The two key drivers were high unemployment levels amongst the youth, and a change in the perception of higher education as a public and private good. Pinheiro explained that other European countries (e.g. the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark and Finland) underwent fundamental policy changes between 1986 and 1995, in order to cope with an exponential increase in the number of higher education students. By contrast, Pinheiro characterised Norway as a 'late reformer' insofar as expansion of the system had occurred in an unco-ordinated and un-orchestrated way. In the absence of a coherent (strategic) framework, the Norwegian government merely did 'repair work' through ad hoc measures. The rationale for expansion was twofold: (1) to allow previously excluded groups access to higher education; and, (2) to reduce existing inequalities with regard to *gender*, *place of residence* (or origin) and *socio-economic background* (class).

The main ad hoc measures taken included the following:

- 1994: The removal of structural barriers at the upper secondary education level in order to make access to higher education more clear and straightforward.
- 1994: The consolidation (merger) of 98 public non-university institutions (colleges) into 26 regional institutions.
- 2001/02: The adaptation of entrance requirements for higher education, targeting mature students (25 years and older) through the recognition of professional experience.

It was not until 2002, ten to fifteen years later than its European counterparts, that the Norwegian government undertook a major ('quality') reform in order to handle the challenges posed by the expansion of the higher education system ("more is problem"), namely: inefficiency and quality (domestic focus); and, international/regional convergence and competitiveness. In the latter context, the reform efforts tackled key external aspects (international trends) resulting from phenomena such as the Bologna Process, the European Union's Lisbon Agenda, globalisation, and international trade in higher education, amongst others. This prepared the ground for the new strategic (higher education) landscape, i.e. "more but different".

Pinheiro provided an overview of the 'expansion reality' which characterised the Norwegian higher education system, including: (a) high gross participation rates (69%); (b) under-representation of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds ('external exclusion'); and, (c) considerable differences in enrolment patterns across (higher education) sub-sectors and academic programmes ('internal inclusion'). Regarding 'internal inclusion', the existing data confirm a strong socio-economic bias

towards university enrolments (*vis á vis* colleges), as well as specific study fields such as *medicine*, *law*, and *architecture*. In terms of policy outcomes, recent studies (2003/04) reveal both positive and negative consequences of the measures taken. Whereas the latter include factors like: the successful removal of structural barriers, the attraction of new mature students, and the strong commitment by institutions to implement the reform efforts. The former, impacted (negatively) on: the general (student) progression throughout upper secondary education, growth stagnation in universities in detriment of colleges, diversity in reform implementation (and access-) criteria by institutions, and the overall decline of academic standards amongst students.

To conclude, Pinheiro summarised the most important contextual (contemporary) issues surrounding Norwegian higher education as including: (1) expected labour market shortages in certain fields (e.g. health, ICT, education) as a result of strong economic growth rather than population decline; (2) the problem of over-capacity (i.e. lack of students) in particular regional colleges; and, (3) the increasing pressure on the binary divide between universities and colleges, with the latter being allowed (by the Ministry) to 'drift' more and more towards the former type.

## 6. Cross Cutting Themes - Nico Cloete (CHET)

Nico Cloete's comments focused on the main strategies used by governments to deal with expansion, using the characterisations of expansion identified by the research group; namely, 'more is better', 'more is a problem', 'more but different'. With regard to the cross-cutting themes, Cloete highlighted the tensions between *national prerogatives* on the one hand, and *globalising pressures* on the other. After a period of radical reforms, three of the four country-cases had to cope with the difficulties related to 'inherent legacies', as well as new 'global dynamics'. In this sense there is a similarity between the cases ('the end of exceptionalism'), with less significant, albeit unique, contextual issues arising in each of the three countries. Cloete stressed that policy efforts (across the four countries) shifted over time from a focus on 'inclusion' ('more students is better') towards the 'knowledge economy' paradigm and the human skills required to enable its development (i.e. 'more but different types of graduates'). A comparison of participation rates shows that while there had been an increase in the percentage of black students in South Africa, South Africa is the only one of the four countries with a participation rate of under 20%, while the other four exceed 50%.

All four countries had to handle problems related to the *exclusion* of certain student groups, and efforts to deal with exclusion had only been partly successful, i.e. all countries still face considerable challenges relating to 'internal exclusion'. In this context, massification had helped to broaden the middle class but has failed to eradicate existing socio-economic exclusion at the system (and institutional) level.

With regard to *capacity* (both system and institutional), *quality* and *efficiency* were seen as two key elements, particularly in light of the new global 'competitive' agenda. As far as *affordability* is concerned, Cloete said that despite popular belief, public investment in higher education has not decreased recently, and that appealing to the private sector has been a common strategy (by governments) to aid system-level expansion. Concerning the *institutional landscape*, a pressure to 'change' and 'adapt' was recognised across national settings because of increasing pressures on the binary system (Norway and South Africa), as well as the growth and/or decline of private institutions (Czech Republic and Portugal). An important element inherent in this problematic is the balance between institutional 'drift' and differentiation. As for

*global links*, Cloete emphasised the emergence (and importance) of the 'knowledge economy' and its different political agendas, which are not yet prevalent in South Africa and the African continent as a whole. At the European (regional) level, supranational efforts like Bologna and the role of expert groups (e.g. OECD economists) are increasingly coming to the fore.

To conclude, Cloete elaborated on the relationship between national governments and higher education institutions. In Portugal and South Africa a problem of *trust* seems to affect this interaction, with governments exhibiting a low level of trust, accompanied by attempts to 'regulate' the activities of institutions. On the other hand, in Norway and the Czech Republic there has been a gradual delegation of power from central level.

## 7. Discussion

A very animated discussion followed the presentations. Below are some of the issues addressed:

### 1. The importance of lifelong learning (LLL)

Amaral commented that LLL is strong within the Nordic countries but not across the whole (European) continent. Maassen stressed that the Nordic region is also struggling with LLL since "the ambitions are much stronger than the realities". A key issue in the latter context is related to who funds LLL activities (higher education institutions, employers, governments, etc.). Finish polytechnics have initiated successful combinations of LLL with research and development (R&D), on the one hand, and adult education initiatives for part time students on the other. Funds are made available directly from the central (Finish) government's 'adult education budget' and, according to Maassen, this is the way forward for other Nordic countries.

Sebkova mentioned LLL as being a weak point in the Czech context. Higher education institutions have been invited to offer such programmes (either free of charge or paid/tuition). However, to date, the issue of funding has not been solved. Furthermore, Sebkova stressed that LLL is weakly co-ordinated at the system level (i.e. no clear responsibilities at the central level), and there is a lack of co-operation between higher education institutions and employers, with the former not interested in offering flexible programme offerings that are related to labour market needs.

### 2. Tensions between high academic standards ('attract the best students') and free access ('accept everyone else')?

In Portugal the government deliberately lowered the standards for access to higher education which led to an overnight increase of 60% in the number of candidates. In order to increase capacity at a limited public cost, the Portuguese government allowed the private sector to flourish in an uncontrollable way, which resulted in an overall decline in 'quality'. Portugal also initiated special governmental arrangements (for more than 10 years) allowing mature students (above 25 years) to access higher education, but with very limited success (i.e. less than 1% of new enrolments). It was stressed that in South Africa, massification and qualitative changes are issues that deserve careful analysis beyond traditional factors such as social capital and personal aspirations.

In South Africa there is also a need to look at the higher education system as a whole where participation rates are increasing but the overall quality at the system level could be declining. In this context, the analysis of new curricular structures and alternative educational routes (e.g. vocational colleges/polytechnics) are seen as necessary. An example is the problem of low migration rates from vocational higher education institutions to traditional (research-based) universities, where institutional profiles and the curricula create barriers for students' choices. Another key issue raised relates to the interface between vocational colleges, LLL and the labour market, where the colleges are under pressure to deliver on existing external demands and expectations. Maassen stated that the European Commission is paying close attention to the higher education landscape (i.e. types of higher education institutions and qualifications offered) where the majority of higher education institutions in the region are categorised as non research-based.

On the issue of mobility, Maassen highlighted that Norway leads the way in terms of allowing students to migrate between the two systems, i.e. the ability to take courses at both colleges and universities. Another South African participant commented that the new (domestic) comprehensive universities are struggling since the existing framework does not provide them (or their students) with a direct route to other levels of the (higher education) system.

### **3. Conceptual analysis with regard to exclusion/inclusion issues**

One of the participants observed a tension between 'increasing diversity of students' and 'access to higher education', as well as the important distinction between *pragmatic* and *rhetoric* elements. This comment led another South African participant to state, "We do not have a 'normal' higher education system!" as there is no representative match between the student (and academic) populations and the country's demographic profile. This issue was seen as affecting curricula structures at all levels. The same participant concluded: "We need to bring back the 'race' debate once again! We are [still] very undemocratic in South Africa!" The development of an 'equity strategy' based on "labels of inequality" focusing on *race* and *gender* was seen as a useful starting point. In response, Cloete pointed out that if the knowledge economy paradigm is becoming more important, then equity has to be seen within a context of massification. Currently South Africa is creating a more equitable elite while there is a severe shortage of high level skills.

### **4. Social class and access**

A participant from Norway argued that the socio-economic gap between students goes back to the primary system, and that highly educated parents provide more/better 'home support' to their children's educational activities. This is an "advantage" in terms of background. Interestingly, a participant from South Africa stressed that institutional differentiation tends to occur along the lines of 'social class' with higher education institutions becoming more selective as a result of the massification of higher education. In this context, one of the participants (SA) suggested the analysis of student backgrounds along 'race' and 'social class', as well as other interesting trends such as white students from lower social backgrounds. One of the South African participants highlighted the importance of studying the 'structural barriers' to accessing higher education institutions. For example, to shed light on queries like: What do students want? How do they make their choices? What is available to them? How is knowledge organised from within the system? (i.e. at higher education institutions). Scandinavian countries like Denmark and Sweden were referred to as good examples. An important point made was that it is becoming clear that in many countries massification might widen the middle class and give

access to groups such as women and excluded racial/ethnic groups, but does not necessarily lead to more representative participation by the poor and the working class.

## **5. The 'knowledge economy' and the role of different stakeholders**

It was pointed out that in South Africa the Department of Science and Technology, rather than the Ministry of Education, was addressing this important phenomenon. Maassen highlighted that in other countries, "more but different" type of strategies are not coming from the Ministries of Education per se but rather from other governmental departments interested in the economic rationale. This is a phenomenon that is part of a current study to identify and analyse the role of different stakeholders, as well as the way in which higher education institutions are responding to these sorts of external elements. Amaral stressed that the European Commission is playing a key role with regard to 'knowledge society' discourses (and priorities) at the regional level (e.g. via the EU's 'Lisbon Agenda'). According to Cloete, the existing quantitative evidence (SA) points to the fact that the 'equity' and 'development' problems are not being solved by the current institutional landscape. In Cloete's opinion, the real 'massification' debate (after the initial/dominant one on 'equity') is only now starting in South Africa. The key issue is how to deal simultaneously with 'equity' and 'massification', especially when the country is struggling to cope with widespread skill shortages. Amaral argued that in Europe, a strong tension exists between an 'equalitarian rhetoric' and reality, whereas in the United States 'differentiation' amongst higher education institutions was made more explicit.

Another South African participant claimed the need for a major shift from the current (higher education) national debates, driven by 'efficiency' agendas, towards a new discourse that focuses on 'social justice' and 'economic development' imperatives, as is the case in other countries. In this context, Amaral stressed the critical role undertaken by the World Bank in higher education, in changing its emphasis (over time) from 'efficiency' to 'development' in light of labour market needs and efficiency concerns.

## **6. The selected participating countries**

A participant questioned why developing countries such as India and China were not included in the study? Maassen argued that the framework used across the four countries (inclusion versus exclusion) was chosen on the basis of past legacies. For example, elements from the fascist regime are still prevalent in contemporary Portuguese society. In a similar vein, the apartheid system in South Africa and the long history of colonialism in Norway were seen as relevant legacy factors affecting the nature of the higher education system in the long run. Picking up on Maassen's remarks, Amaral provided the example of the arrangements present during the Salazar regime in Portugal which made it less attractive for individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds to embrace an academic career. The current study on access has a fairly limited scope (and budget), thus focusing mainly on a set of core factors. Empirical work at the institutional level, which sheds light on the type and nature of internal arrangements, could be a second (follow-up) stage for the study. This would depend upon the future decision of major funding sources (research donors).



**SEMINAR INVITATION**  
**GOVERNING ACCESS:**  
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2-3 March 2006  
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CHET is part of a four country project (Norway, Portugal, Czech Republic and SA) to study the Governing of Access. Some of the research questions underlying the study are:

- Why is the government involved in the access to higher education issue - knowledge society, human capital approach, social agenda?
- How is the access to higher education organised/regulated – mechanisms / instruments?
- What are the “outcomes” of access regulation?
- How do the reforms in governance models affect the governance of higher education?

**Thursday, 2 March 2006**

19h00 Drinks and Dinner at Hildebrand Restaurant  
(Pierhead, V&A Waterfront, Cape Town)

20h30 Welcome and Introduction to the Project:  
Alberto Amaral & Peter Maassen

**Friday, 3 March 2006**

09h00-11h00 Current Challenges *Chair: Teboho Moja*

- Portugal - Antonio Malgalhaes
- Czech Republic - Helena Sebkova
- South Africa - Ian Bunting
- Norway – Romulo Pinheiro
- Common Themes

11h00-11h20 Tea

11h20-13h00 General Discussion *Chair: Nico Cloete*

13h00 Snacks and Departure

## Appendix 2: Seminar Participants

Name	Institution	Email Address
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