



Why South Korean Universities Have Low International Rankings

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The Argument

Although South Korea has the 14th largest economy in the world with a total GDP of \$971,100,000,000 (CIA, 2007:8) and with a per capita GDP of \$24,800 (CIA, 2007:8), having received a Global Competitiveness Index ranking of 11th place for the years 2007-2008 (GCI, 2007-2008), and a literacy rate of 97.9% for 15 year olds (CIA, 2007:5) with the country being ranked first in reading, fourth in mathematics and sixth in science proficiency, for the same age group, by The Programme for International Student Assessment - 2006 (PISA, 2006:47,53 & 20), the country can by no means boast about the international rankings of its universities. For instance, the best Korean university (Seoul National University) places 21st in Asia and 164th in the world according to the Shanghai Jiao Tong Ranking system (Figure 1), while receiving a ranking of 51st in the world according to the Times Higher Education - QS world Universities Rankings 2007 (Figure 2).

Figure 1 (Shanghai, 2007)

Shanghai Jiao Tong University Rankings - 2007		
Asian Ranking	University Name	World Ranking
21	Seoul National University	164
32	Korea Advanced Inst. Sci. & Tech	220
41	Yonsei University	303
50	Korea University	324
58	Pohang Univ. Sci. & Tech.	335
59	Sungkyunkwan University	334
70	Hanyang University	417
87	Pusan National University	449

Figure 2 (QS World, 2007)

Times Higher Education - QS World University Rankings 2007	
World Ranking	University Name
51	Seoul National University
132	Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Tech
233	Pohang University of Science and Technology
236	Yonsei University
243	Korea University
380	Sungkyunkwan University
398	Sogang University

Sadly, only six and seven South Korean universities made it into the top 400 list in the respective rankings. Surely, it's not because Koreans are unwilling to invest in education since the total amount spent on education accounted for 7.5% of the country's Gross Domestic Product in 2003, ranking second in education spending after Iceland among member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Kim, 2008). Moreover, just about 100% of South Korean children complete high school education with 80% going on to post secondary institutions (Kim, 2008). Clearly, there is no shortage of willingness of the country to invest in education and there is no lack of motivation by Korean learners to study.

Overall, education is given major importance in Korean society, with only the best achieving students being admitted to the highest ranked Korean universities. As it is in Japan, the South Korean "university-system is characterised by a hierarchy structured by informal rankings" (Kang, 2004). In South Korea the main determiner of a person's success in life is which university s/he graduates from. For instance, the newly hired professors of Dankook University at its Seoul Campus in 2006 (Dankook, 2006:11) were either graduates of the 'top elite Korean universities' (Figure 3: Seoul National, Yonsei and Ewha) or graduates of American universities.

Figure 3 (Kang, 2004)

Name of University	1994-2001 Average CSAT Percentile	Joongang's Ranking	Location	National/Private
1. Seoul National University	98.7	3	Seoul	National
2. Pohang University of Science and Technology	98.4	1	Kyongsang	Private
3. Yonsei University	96.8	4	Seoul	Private
4. Korea University	96.5	5	Seoul	Private
5. Sogang University	95.1	7	Seoul	Private
6. Seoul National University of Education	93.6	-	Seoul	National
7. Ewha Woman's University	92.9	9	Seoul	Private
8. Hanyang University	92.1	7	Seoul	Private
9. Hankook university of Foreign Language Studies	92.1	21	Seoul	Private
10. Ajou University	90.3	18	Kyongki	Private
11. Handong Global University	89.6	-	Kyongsang	Private
12. Chung-Ang University	89.0	12	Seoul	Private
13. Hongik university	88.7	-	Seoul	Private
14. Pusan National University	87.9	10	Kyongsang	National
15. University of Seoul	87.7	22	Seoul	National
16. Sungkyunkwan University	87.5	6	Seoul	Private
17. Kyung Hee University	86.2	16	Seoul	Private

On the whole, the university the average Korean graduates from really does matter, and not only are Koreans aware of the ranking system of the universities, but more to the point they place a great deal of importance on it. Then why is it that they allow their universities to stay at the low international rankings? It is essential that at the outset closer attention is given to the criteria of the Times and Shanghai ranking systems before such a question can even be attempted to be answered. The Shanghai system, for instance, "measures research excellence in part by the number of Nobel - and Fields-winning alumni" (BioMed Central, 2007) at the institutions and the amount of article

publications in Science or Nature Journals by the faculty. On the other hand, the Times ranking is a British publication that is based on a peer review basis, wherein as a first phase, 3,070 scholars are asked to give their opinions using a latest 'response model' system (QS Methodology, 2006). That is each year, [the aim] ... is to invite all previous reviewers to return and update their opinion. Then we purchase two databases, one of 180,000 international academics from the World Scientific (based in Singapore) and another of around 12,000 from Mardev - focused mainly on Arts & humanities which is poorly represented in the former (QS Methodology, 2006).

Now that the basic mechanisms for the ranking systems have in part been unveiled, it may be prudent to consider the following: As depicted in the complete Dankook University new hires list for both Cheonan and Seoul campuses, for 2006, (Dankook, 2006:11) the professors are all of Korean origin, therefore, since Dankook as well as other Korean universities are apparently reluctant to hire foreign professors for all fields of studies, the institutions are invariably hiring from an already limited pool of talent. Surely, this strategy will not lead to the hiring of the most qualified professors in the world since they tend to come from diverse backgrounds. More importantly, Korean universities regularly pay their often non tenured foreign faculty considerably less than the Korean professors who are for the most part tenured (Figures 4.1 & 4.2). Accordingly, the Amnesty International KOREA (REPUBLIC OF) Report 2007 stipulates how "most [migrant workers] received less pay than Korean workers for the same work" (Amnesty, 2007). Additionally, a fully qualified and esteemed American instructor (to remain anonymous) with two MAs and a PHD in his field of study and several international publications to his name was told by his (an undisclosed) Korean college that regardless of his qualifications and experience he can only receive the "foreigner salary" which is considerably less than the Korean pay. In line with this trend, Anyang University is offering only 100,000 won/month more to PHD holders (2,500,000 won/month + 500,000 won housing allowance = 3,000,000 won/year) than to those with MAs for an 'English Native-speaking Instructor' position starting in 2009 (Dave, 2008). In effect, if this trend continues, Korean universities will find it ever more difficult to compete with American universities in the task of acquiring highly qualified professors. This will invariably place Korean universities low on the Shanghai rankings, and on the Times rankings since it's an opinion based ranking system and few researchers will give high rankings to universities that are clearly operating on discriminatory practices toward its foreign faculty. It may well be time to improve international diplomacy and start paying foreign professors fair and competitive wages.

Perhaps, more foreign professors need to be tenured in Korea to ensure them higher pay. After all, of the dozens of foreign professors I worked with in Korea, only one happened to be tenured. On the other hand, many of the Korean professors I worked and do work with are tenured. Take, for instance, the difference in salaries offered to non-tenured and tenured foreign professors at POSTECH where foreign professors are offered 33,600,000/12 hour week for a non-permanent position and 69,000,000/25 hour week for a permanent position (Figure 4.2). Not only is the salary considerably larger for a permanent position, which for the most part Korean professors are given, but additionally the amount of hours a foreign professor is required to teach in a permanent framework is also considerably more than what a Korean professor would be required to teach under the same job title. According to the Korea Research Development Institute the average number of hours Korean professors teach per week is 8.9 hours (KEDI, 2007) (Figure 4.1), and not 25 hours as is the case with foreign professors at POSTECH. By and large, the discrepancies between Korean and foreign salaries and or the number of hours they teach are plainly seen in Figures 4.1 and 4.2. It may be in the best interest of Korean universities that their uneven treatment of Korean and foreign professors cease to exist if their goal is to recruit a higher number of qualified foreign professors and researchers in the hope of gaining a better chance at becoming world class institutions. What is more, it may be misguided practice on the part of Korean universities to assign qualified foreigners different job titles such as 'Full-Time Lecturer' or 'Full-Time Instructor' just so they could be placed into a lower salary cap (Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.1 (KEDI, 2007)

The Average Number of Hours Korean Professors Work by Region

Location	Ulsan	Incheon	Seoul	Gyeonggi	Jeonnam	Gyungbuk	Jeju	Average
Hours/Week	5.3	6.7	7.8	8.3	11	10	13.3	8.9

Figure 4.2 (Choi, 2006), (*Dave, 2008) & (*AKH, 2008)

Korean Professors' 2006 (& *Foreign Instructors' 2009) Annual Salaries at Korean Universities

National Ranking	University	First Year	5 Year Seniority	10 Year Seniority	15 Year Seniority	20 Year Seniority	*Foreign Full-Time Instructor/Lecturer	*Tenured professor (Tenured Track)
1	Postech University of Science and Technology	67,259,000	-	84,178,000	-	-	33,600,000/12 hour week	69,000,000/25 hour week
2	Hanyang University	60,772,000	67,705,000	80,950,000	90,648,000	97,119,000	35,160,000/12 hour week (Including Housing Allowance)	
9	Korea University	54,708,000	68,814,000	83,377,000	89,770,000	100,946,000	-42,088,880/18 hour week (Seoul) -41,247,600/16 hour week (Dohjeon) -41,337,600/18 hour week (Seoul-2008)	
10	Hoseo University	54,288,000	59,280,000	67,240,000	73,498,000	79,756,000	-24,888,000/15 hour week (2006) -26,520,000/15 hour week (2007) -Approx:28,980,000/15 hour week (2008)	
22	Dankook University of Foreign Language Studies	49,700,000	59,546,000	70,264,000	80,634,000	87,297,000	-37,296,000 (2009) -34,863,600-52,177,200/8-12 hour week (2008) -33,848,400-50,658,000/8-12 hour week (2007)	
24	Yonsei University	49,320,000	62,196,000	72,585,000	87,536,000	92,720,000	32,400,000-33,600,000/15 hour week (2008 & 2009) (including Housing Allowance)	

Note! * Foreign Instructor/Lecturer salaries are 2009 figures unless otherwise indicated. (Salaries in Korean Won)

Figure 4.3 (Choi, 2006) & (AKH, 2008)

Professors' Salaries at Hankook University of Foreign Language Studies - In Korean Won (X 1000)

Job Titles	Starting Salary	5 Year Tenure	10 Year Tenure	15 Year Tenure	20 Year Tenure	25 Year Tenure
Full Professor (Korean) 2006 Figures	49,700	59,546	70,264	80,634	87,297	97,680
Full Professor (Korean) 2006 Figures Adjusted to 2009 Rates Using a 4% Yearly Inflation Value	55,906	66,981	79,037	90,702	98,197	105,650
Full Professor (Foreign) 2009 Figure	55,824	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Foreign Associate Professor 2009 Figure	49,776	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Foreign Assistant Professor 2009 Figure	43,524	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Full-time Foreign Lecturer 2009 Figure	37,296	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

A more comprehensive look at the Hankook University of Foreign Language Studies (HUFS) professors' salaries does suggest that any foreign professor holding a job title Full Professor at the university would indeed be expected to receive relatively the same starting salary as a Korean professor holding the same job title, taking into consideration the 4% yearly inflation adjustment raise which is more or less standard at Korean universities (Figure 4.3). Even though this data set does indicate that at least HUFS appears to be on the road to reform, it should be noted once again that 'Foreign Professors' are seldom given full tenure and only a limited number of universities offer non-discriminatory rates to their non-Korean faculty.

What is more, one must not lose sight of the predicament foreign professors are placed in with regard to not receiving tenure. That is, without tenure there is no chance for an increase in salary by tenure as is shown in Figures 4.2 & 4.3, thus any foreign professor who has stayed at his/her respective university for any length of time will only be subject to an average of 4% yearly inflation adjustment raise which Korean professors receive in addition to the pay raise due to their tenure. Overall, this apparent discriminatory practice gives few highly qualified foreign professors sufficient motivation to work for any Korean university on a long term basis. Should more well-qualified foreign professors decide to remain in their university faculty positions on long term basis, their respective universities could achieve a lower foreign faculty turnover rate, thus reducing the incessant demand for foreign faculty and in turn have a larger pool of well-qualified professors to choose from. Nevertheless, it should be stated that Korean universities are dissimilar and institutions such as POSTECH, Korea University (KU) and HUFS have taken considerable steps toward resolving discrepancies in salaries of Korean versus foreign faculty. Though all things considered, there may still be room for improvement at these institutions in ensuring that foreign and Korean faculty receive equal workloads for equal pay.

In support of my argument, Dr. Ferenc Hudecz, the president of Eorvos Lorand University (Established in 1635- having produced five Noble Prize laureates in chemistry and physics), who is trying to recruit Korean Professors to work at his university's new department of Korean Studies has made the remark that it is not attractive for visiting professors to work in Hungary since the salaries are non competitive on an international scale. Therefore, in his opinion, all visiting professors need to be paid by their home universities so that they can receive fair wages (Kang, 2007). In much the same way, Korean universities need to offer competitive wages to foreign and visiting professors to persuade more of them to work at Korean universities. Therefore, it may very well be ill advised to pay fair wages to only those involved in the National Project Towards Building World Class Universities.

Perhaps another important reason why Korean universities fall low on the international rankings is due to the lack of research opportunities at their colleges (WCU, 2008-2012). Although, the National Project Towards Building World Class Universities (2008-2012) does highlight this inadequacy, especially when compared to American universities, and it does bring to light the need to hire highly qualified foreign professors and researchers to do joint research with Korean professors and the need for halting brain drain to especially the United States (WCU, 2008-2012). As a matter of fact, the government is willing to allocate 165 billion won to Korean universities this year alone (2008) to assist them in attracting more high-quality foreign professors and researchers from abroad (Kim, 2008:3, &10). Taken as a whole,

the project invites world-class scholars and researchers to develop world class academic programs and departments in Korean universities, which will ultimately lead to the creation of world class institutions of higher education in Korea (WCU, 2008:2-1).

At least that is the aim of the project, although it may prove to be an insufficient effort at improving the international rankings of Korean universities. It is true that the Korean government is willing to offer as much as US\$ 300,000 a year per foreign researcher, but this kind of pay is apparently limited to only individuals to be involved in the program. This attempt at rectifying the problem seems to be a temporary fix given that the program has an apparent life span of only four years. Furthermore, the program appears to be limited mainly to the science and technology fields, although this may be due to the fact that the Shanghai and Times rankings are heavily biased toward the science and nature fields. For this reason, the Korean Ministry of Education may appear to be much more interested in artificially boosting the rankings of Korean universities as opposed to making them better postsecondary institutions all around. Additionally, the project does not touch upon the issue of improving the conditions for some of the highly qualified foreign professors already in Korea so as to try and keep them from leaving considering that many of them already do so after experiencing life as ghost professors at Korean universities. A Korean article by Noh Jin-seop, titled 'Just treat us like equals: Foreign professors' in the Sisa Journal (Noh, 2007) sheds light on how foreign professors feel they are treated as if though they did not exist and are often kept out of all administrative aspects of their departments. Regardless of having MAs and PhDs they are nonetheless treated like run of the mill English academy instructors, consequently more and more of them are discouraged from staying in Korea (Noh, 2007). Additionally, while certain Korean professors work only seven hours per week, foreign professors work 12 to 20 hours for considerably less pay (Noh, 2007). Therefore, where does the National Program leave those qualified professors who are paid less, and/or have to teach more classes, than their Korean counterparts? This kind of treatment of foreign professors fundamentally goes against the National Project's efforts to get more qualified professors to come to work and essentially stay in Korea. What is more, even the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination recommended on August 17, 2007 that "the Korean Parliament should define what racial discrimination is... [for] that is the first thing to eliminate discrimination against alien workers..." (Chosun, 2007).

Additionally, there is no mention of improving the research conditions for the already present foreign faculty in Korea, and even the research that is to be carried out under the umbrella of the National Project is to be a joint Korean-Foreign venture. Moreover, at most Korean universities, primarily Korean professors are entitled to research grants (Noh, 2007). On a more personal level, when I applied for a position at an (undisclosed) Korean university I was told I would not get hired due to my desire to do research since there was no room for research in the framework of the position I was applying for. That is to say, all of the above may be a sign of discouragement toward foreign professors to carry out individual research at South Korean universities. What is more, while my Korean counterparts were being paid millions of won for articles published in academic journals, I myself received no compensation for having been published in the Journal of English as an International Language (EIJL, 2007) even though I openly disclosed the name of the college I was working for. By and large, if the program has any chance of succeeding, there needs to be a more fundamental change in the approach toward foreign professors in general, otherwise the project may appear to be just another attempt at window dressing the current situation and that may not be enough to raise the rankings of Korean universities on the whole.

Based on the Harvard University example, since it is the number one university in both rankings, wherein the "majority of the students, faculty and staff are more diverse in age, race, ethnicity, nationality, experience and outlook than you would be likely to find almost anywhere else" (Harvard Culture, 2008), it should be evident that hiring the most qualified candidates, regardless of culture and nationality should prove to be a winning strategy for universities if their aim is to place higher on the international rankings. Perhaps Korean universities have a lot to learn from the Harvard example.

Figure 5 (Shanghai, 2007)

Academic Ranking of World Universities - 2007

World Rank	Institution	Country	National Rank
1	Harvard Univ	USA	1
2	Stanford Univ	USA	2
3	Univ California - Berkeley	USA	3
4	Univ Cambridge	UK	1
5	Massachusetts Inst Tech (MIT)	USA	4
6	California Inst Tech	USA	5
7	Columbia Univ	USA	6
8	Princeton Univ	USA	7
9	Univ Chicago	USA	8
10	Univ Oxford	UK	2
11	Yale Univ	USA	9
12	Cornell Univ	USA	10
13	Univ California - Los Angeles	USA	11
14	Univ California - San Diego	USA	12
15	Univ Pennsylvania	USA	13
16	Univ Washington - Seattle	USA	14
17	Univ Wisconsin - Madison	USA	15
18	Univ California - San Francisco	USA	16
19	Johns Hopkins Univ	USA	17
20	Tokyo Univ	Japan	1

Conceivably it is the lack of diversity in Korean universities and their reluctance to pay fair wages to foreign professors, so they could acquire a larger number of qualified professionals, which sets them so far back in the rankings. In effect, in 2006 only 3.75% of the overall faculty, at both Korean private and national post secondary institutions combined, were comprised of foreign professors (Herald, 2007). Surely an example needs to be taken from American universities, which occupy 17 of the top 20 places in the world according to the Shanghai ranking system (Figure 5). After all, it is inconceivable that the top 17 American universities in the list hire only American nationals and pay any other national considerably less in wages. That would simply be unethical and would certainly stir uproar in American society, as diverse in ethnicity as it is. Moreover, if that were the case, the top American universities would not be able to acquire the most qualified professionals need to fill the tutorial positions in their colleges, and thus would inevitably fall back in the rankings. Therefore, the example of ethnic diversity set forth by the top 17 American universities, especially Harvard, may very well be worth following in order to achieve long term gains.

There are several key issues with regard to why it would be in the best interest of Korean universities to gain improved positions in the rankings. For instance, "South Korea may have the lowest birth rate in the world" (Gluck, 2003): the "total fertility rate was 1.13 children in 2006" (Kim, 2008). This should pose as a worrisome factor to most Korean universities since the rate of enrolment would inevitably falter due to the declining size of the new generations of young Koreans. After all, it would take a fertility rate of 2.1 children for the Korean population to stay where it currently is. This fact alone would surely make it more difficult for Korean universities to keep up the current enrolment rates unless they reduced the entrance exam score requirements in which case Korean universities would be prone to dropping even further on the international rankings. However, by actually improving their rankings, Korean universities could attract more foreign students to fill their classrooms. Even though the enrolment of foreign students in Korean universities has almost doubled from 11,646 students in 2001 to 32,557 students in 2006, the percentage of non-Asian students is nonetheless on the decline, thus limiting ethnic diversity (Xinhua, 2006) and further moving away from the Harvard example of varied ethnicity (Harvard Culture, 2008). What should be more alarming is that, according to the education ministry, in the year 2006, as many as 100,000 Korean students studied in Japan alone during the same period (McNeill, 2008:3/4). Mr. Nam Pyo Suh, president of KAIST (Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology) argues that if there is no improvement made at Korean universities, neither foreign professors nor Korean students will make it their first choice (Suh in McNeill, 2008:3/4).

As a simple analogy, is it conceivable that a Manchester United Football Club with predominantly British players on the team could have won the European Champions League title in the 2007-2008 season without Cristiano Ronaldo and Nani from Portugal, Van der Sar from Holland, Evra from Senegal, Anderson from Brazil and Park from South Korea (Man U., 2008)? More importantly, could the league have four powerhouse teams like Manchester United, Chelsea, Arsenal and Liverpool with mainly British players and mediocre foreign players on its teams? There are a handful of outstanding and a country full of average British players, it is true, but could the English Premier League be as prominent without the foreign players on its team rosters? In very much the same way, could you imagine a Harvard University with a predominantly American faculty, with only run of the mill foreign professors in its colleges? Would such a Harvard University place number one on both the Shanghai and the Times rankings? It is highly unlikely! In addition, would students from around the world flock to such a university to further fuel the American economy with an influx of much welcomed foreign funds? As it should be more evident by now, it is beneficial for Korean universities to not only invest in qualified faculty but to keep the ones already in Korea if they are to have any hopes in topping the international rankings and therefore attracting more foreign students to their colleges. If not only for common sense and to help boost the Korean economy but at least for the sake of National Pride of a country that has so much to be proud of when it comes to the educational performance of its 15 year old student body.

More importantly, more foreign professors at Korean universities would inevitably lead to more courses taught in English which in turn could eventually attract more foreign students to enrol in Korean universities which then would lead to more revenues that could pay for even more foreign salaries and so on and so on... Currently, few university programmes are offered in English at most Korean universities and this trend may need to be changed if domestic universities hope to attract more foreign students. After all, English and not the Korean language is the new global language and to compete in the global education market wherein attracting more foreign and domestic students is good business sense, it should be a priority for Korean universities to offer more courses in English. I myself had the opportunity do post graduate studies at two Korean universities, but decided to go against it since most of the courses were taught only in Korean.

Overall, "South Korea has the lowest proportion of foreign student enrolment at universities: less than 1%" (The Education Blog, 2008). "If the number of foreign students increases to 100,000... [Korea] can earn 160 billion won" (Shin Kang-Tak of the Ministry of Education in The Education Blog, 2008). What is more, by keeping Korean students from studying at higher ranked universities abroad, a foreseeable increase in the enrolment rate at domestic universities could easily be achieved, and to ensure that fewer Korean students traveled abroad it would yet again be essential to improve the international rankings of the domestic universities to make them more desirable.

The outflow of students is an added drain on the Korean economy since students spend tens of thousands of dollars while studying abroad. "Only a qualified education system will attract students from abroad" (The Education Blog, 2008), and in order to achieve this goal more qualified faculty needs to be hired from abroad, however, a number of qualified foreign professors have made the personal remark that they will not stay in Korea due to the low wages they are being offered (Source: Personal Encounters). They would much rather work elsewhere where the wages are much more competitive. Sadly this may eventually prove to be an unforeseen loss to the Korean university system since they are in effect forced to settle for less qualified candidates who are willing to work for lower salaries.

As far as the foreign English professors in Korea are concerned, the above would equally apply. Few Korean post secondary institutions have qualified foreign English professors. This is partly due to the fact that the more qualified tend to search for the highest paying jobs, and Korea is not the place where this is readily on offer. Nevertheless, this is not necessarily equally the case at all Korean post secondary institutions, for instance at Sogang and Hanyang universities where Korean and foreign professors are treated relatively the same (Noh, 2007) and as mentioned before POSTECH, KU and HUIF did take considerable steps to end biased salary discrepancies. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, the unfair treatment of foreign professors seems to be the norm in South Korea, thus, the better qualified foreign professors tend to stay away and even if they decide to work in Korea there is an elevated likelihood that they will eventually leave Korea because they can attain more for both their careers and pocketbooks while working for universities outside the Korean peninsula (Noh, 2007).

Conclusion

By and large, the most logical step Korean universities could take to improve their rankings is to hire more qualified foreign professors and to implement a fundamental restructuring in their administrative approach toward their foreign faculty in order to make it more attractive for them to stay. Perhaps, this would even go a long way in saving the Korean university system from a possible pending crisis due to the decline of the country's young. Not to mention that it would also be a positive diplomatic move in the eyes of the international community and this could prove invaluable for the Korean education system on the whole in today's global society.

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