

**Further Education and Skills in
Northern Ireland:
Policy and Practice in a Post-Conflict Society**

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Abstract

This paper contextualises the Further Education (FE) sector in Northern Ireland (NI). It outlines the specific political, social and economic influences that have shaped its position as a major but understated educational provider in what remains a highly divided educational system that is slowly transitioning in a post-conflict environment. Key policy frameworks underpinning sectoral development are described, showing how many policy initiatives have been both 'borrowed' from the English context and adapted to local need. The article proceeds to highlight a number of curricular and institutional innovations that have contributed to the development of a small-scale, but distinctive educational, social and economic model. The piece concludes by suggesting that the NI FE experience has the potential to contribute not only to its own specific conditions but, through its 'policy and practice' adaptations', to positively influence FE policy and practice in other parts of the United Kingdom (UK) that require interventions around skills development economic growth and social cohesion.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, further education, policy and practice, post-conflict

The NI context – the shaping effects of a post-conflict society

Northern Ireland (NI) has a population of approximately 1.5 million people and is the smallest of all the four countries considered in this Special Issue. It has become known for decades of violence and unrest, colloquially known as ‘the Troubles’. Issues of national identity and constitutional disagreements have dominated daily life and virtually all elements of civic society are mediated through this lens. Whilst ceasefires have been in place for over 20 years since the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement (GFA) of 1998 and there has been relative ‘peace’, the educational systems discussed in this article have been developed against the background of a divided society which is slowly transitioning to a more settled, post-conflict setting.

The Further Education (FE) system in NI has received very little academic attention and readers may believe that it might be automatically aligned with England on educational issues. Certainly, the FE sector in NI followed the same route as its colleagues in other countries of the UK by incorporating in 1998, with 17 Further Education Colleges/Institutes merged into six regional colleges under the Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. The colleges are independent corporate bodies managed by Boards of Governors who are required to secure the efficient and effective management of their organisation and to ensure that they provide a suitable and efficient further education to their students. At incorporation, all colleges assumed ownership of assets and liabilities previously controlled by the local education authorities with five Education and Library Boards (now the Education Authority (EA) established in 2015 under the Education Act [NI] 2014).

Responsibility for funding colleges now lies with the Department for the Economy

(DfE), but in practical terms, the day-to-day management of a college is in the hands of the Director and senior management team (Harvey, 2001).

These six regional colleges operate across 40 campuses, spread geographically across NI. The sector employs over 4000 staff and has a turnover of around £250 million annually. The colleges are the main providers of vocational and technical education and training although there is now a growing number of private training providers entering the market. The curriculum offered is broad and diverse extending from basic literacy and numeracy, A levels and GCSEs to higher education certificates, foundation degrees and apprenticeships. The proportion of students taking higher education awards is lower than in other countries at nine per cent. In 2016/17 there were almost 130,000 total enrolments with 78 per cent of those starting a course obtaining recognized qualifications (DfE, 2017a). The further education sector, which described two decades ago as the ‘Cinderella’ service (Moser, 1999: 1), has also been shaped by the cultural, political and economic conditions within NI.

The Educational Framework - its political, social and economic dimensions

The wider educational landscape within NI is different from the other UK jurisdictions and the system is fractured along religious, gender and class lines. Most children (93%) still follow denominationally segregated pathways, attending predominantly Protestant (controlled) or Catholic (maintained) schools (Smith, 2010). The workforce within these schools is also typically segregated along religious lines, reinforcing the divide. Extra-curricular activities including sport and leisure offered in schools will also be divided along religious and cultural boundaries.

Students will engage in different sports, learn different languages, read different books, receive instruction in different religions and learn different perspectives on history according to their religious background (Hayes et al, 2007).

The political dimension

In 2010, the then First Minister of NI, Peter Robinson, launched a fierce critique of the segregated NI educational system describing it as ‘a benign form of apartheid, which is fundamentally damaging to our society’ (Belfast Telegraph, 2010). While the duplication of services meant wasted money, he also questioned the morality of a system ‘which separates our children almost entirely on the basis of their religion’ (p1).

He recommended that a Commission should be put in place to consider ways in which education could become a vehicle for social cohesion stating "I believe that future generations will scarcely believe that such division and separation was common for so long ... who among us would think it acceptable that a state or nation would educate its young people by the criteria of race with white schools or black schools? As a society and administration we are not mere onlookers of this; we are participants and continue to fund schools on this basis. And then we are surprised that we continue to have a divided society’ (Belfast Telegraph, 2010: 1).

There have been attempts over the years to address this issue. As far back as 1974, campaigning parents set up All Children Together (ACT), providing the momentum for the first integrated school where Catholic and Protestant children, as well as those of other religions and none, could be educated together. The first school was opened in 1981 with 28 pupils.

The actions of these concerned parents, who felt that segregated schooling was contributing to the conflict in NI, gradually gained support and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) was established in 1987 to support and oversee what became a ‘sustained peace education initiative’ (McGlynn, 2008: 3). Part of the GFA (1998) was ‘to facilitate and encourage integrated education’ and ‘the number of children attending integrated schools has [since] doubled ... to over 24,000 in 2018’ (NICIE, 2018: 14). However, only some seven per cent of the school-going population attend integrated schools (DE, 2018; NICIE, 2018) and this figure, for now, seems to have stalled.

However, as with most issues in Northern Ireland, the vision of a fully integrated educational system was not shared by all and the Catholic Church condemned Robinson’s remarks as ‘nakedly sectarian’ (Belfast Telegraph, 2010: 1), suggesting that separate school systems simply reflect the divisions in society and did not cause them. Other views prioritized parental choice and demand. For example, the ethos of a Catholic education is still highly valued by parents and the demand for faith-based education shows no sign of diminishing. This can be partially explained as Catholic grammar schools consistently demonstrate academic excellence by topping the published league tables at GCSE and A level (Belfast Telegraph, 2019). Hence, in the primary and post-primary sectors, segregation prevails with FE (and HE) possibly the first time that students engage fully with those from other religions, faiths and viewpoints.

The debate has now moved from full integration, towards a model of ‘shared education’ which requires no structural changes, but rather promotes meaningful cooperation and interaction between schools across the divide with the focus on sharing resources as much as sharing hearts and minds – albeit with the hope that increased contact can also lead to a more peaceful co-existence (Gallagher, 2016).

The class/cultural dimension

The system is further divided by ability, as NI still retains academic selection at the age of 11, long abandoned in other parts of the UK as a transition to the post-primary phase (see Smith, 2010 for a further discussion of educational division). Post-primary school arrangements generally conform to a grammar/secondary dichotomy where grammar schools tend to focus on more academic options with secondary schools following a curriculum with more vocational elements. Latest statistics indicate that 90 per cent of students leaving grammar schools go on to further or higher education, compared with 61 per cent of boys and 74 per cent of girls leaving other schools (JRF, 2018: 5) and non-grammar school leavers are around twice as likely to be unemployed or in an unknown destination. The prioritization of academic success therefore translates into a system where vocational options are viewed as second-best and progression to FE is seen, for many, as a fallback option if you have not done as well as expected (Borooah & Cox, 2015).

The grammar school system appears, at least in quantitative terms, to be successful and educational outcomes in NI generally higher than those in the other UK countries, with more school leavers obtaining five GCSEs at grade C or above, than their UK counterparts (DfE, 2017b).

Schools are keen to retain these students and competition between educational providers tends to limit the pool of applicants, at this level, who will progress to the FE sector. With 38 per cent of young people leaving NI to pursue higher education programmes elsewhere (Jerrim and Shure, 2016), its two universities also compete for numbers at the post-18 level, meaning that participation patterns and progression pathways for students are very distinct from other UK countries.

The economic dimension

At the same time, NI is also characterized by significant problems of deprivation, disaffection and underachievement linked to a relatively weak economic and employment performance compared with the other countries of the UK. The NI economy is only now reaching pre-recession level and the overall employment rate is five percentage points lower than in GB. For young people and those with disabilities and lone parents, it is up to 15 per cent lower than in other countries. Socio-economic deprivation and inter-generational unemployment are all higher than the other UK countries and the effects of violence and conflict have impacted upon whole communities (Tinson and MacInnes, 2016). NI has the largest proportion of people with no qualifications in the UK and indeed, 15.8 per cent of the workforce have no qualifications at all. No other area in the UK is comparable (Gunson et al. 2018) and this figure has to be extremely problematic for all those concerned with upskilling the population and increasing economic development (DfE, 2015).

The NI economy continues to be dominated by small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) with high numbers of microbusinesses.

These factors define the scope in which the FE system must operate and the sector is of significant importance in this context, working directly with over 7500 businesses and a range of private, public and community organisations.

At the time of writing, there are a number of significant challenges ahead for the NI economy. The UK vote to exit the EU has caused a great deal of uncertainty and the challenges of Brexit for the economy has potential implications for the educational sector in general and for the FE sector in particular as they prepare young people for the world of work. The speed of technological changes, the changing nature of globalization and the increased funding issues also could potentially have an impact on the economy going forward.

The policy framework

The FE and skills sector will be crucial to meeting these challenges in the coming years and a number of policy initiatives have been introduced to guide the sector. The 'Further Education Means Business Strategy' (DEL, 2006) signaled an important shift in FE policy in Northern Ireland, positioning the sector firmly at the forefront of economic and workforce development in the region. The stated aim was to ensure that the curriculum offered met the needs of employers in NI, particularly those SMEs which dominate the local employment market. The strategy also set out to provide much greater support to employers in areas such as business development and ideas generation as well as creating a well-qualified workforce necessary for foreign trade and investment. Prior to this strategic development, 30-40 per cent of the FE provision was in recreational areas rather than those that supported the economy.

Some 97 per cent of Government funding is now directed into provision that leads to qualifications on the regulated qualifications framework with a significant vocational focus (NI Assembly, 2014). The ‘Success through Skills Strategy’ (DEL, 2010) maintained this focus on employability and business development.

‘Securing our Success: The apprenticeship strategy in Northern Ireland’ (DEL, 2014) was launched in 2014, followed by ‘Generating our Success: A strategy to bridge skills gaps in young people’ (DEL, 2015) in 2015. Also in 2015, a strategy for tackling economic inactivity, ‘Enabling Success’ was also published. In 2016, the NI Executive’s Programme for Government (PFG) was produced with a framework of strategic outcomes further cementing the focus on employability and economic development.

Governance and devolution

Education is a devolved arrangement passed down to the NI Assembly from the UK government through a series of legislative agreements. In line with the other devolved countries, the NI Assembly has had the freedom to develop regional policies and strategic priorities and the proliferation of policies generated, clearly demonstrated the importance they had placed on education and skills. However, the Assembly and Executive arrangements broke down in January 2017 and, at the time of writing, have not been reinstated.

Key strategic decisions have been in abeyance due to the lack of ministerial direction and budgetary uncertainty caused by the current impasse.

Some examples include the development of an Industrial Strategy where a consultation which closed in April 2017 has not yet been actioned. Similarly, decisions around the Apprenticeship Levy have been neglected from December 2016 (NI Assembly, 2018). Key infrastructure projects have been interrupted and at least 10 school building projects are also on hold.

Figures show that at least 80 per cent of schools have indicated they will not be able to operate within their financial allocations and the situation has been described as being a 'crisis' by principals in the post-primary sector who have written to the Department of Education, the Education Authority and all local MPs (Meredith, 2018).

In previous years when an impasse has existed, direct rule has been implemented from Westminster with English Ministers being delegated to attend to NI business. The current political situation has mitigated against this solution and a recent initiative where senior civil servants stepped in to take major decisions, in the absence of a functioning Assembly or local Ministers, has been overturned legally. It remains to be seen what effect this will have on education and more-over, on other essential services, in the long-term. But it is clear that the current educational landscape is extremely difficult for decision-makers and policy-makers. Decisions around Brexit also have unknown consequences for the educational community.

Policy borrowing and adaptation

It is notable that many of the key policy developments introduced in NI closely follow the English system, often being introduced several years later, with minor alterations to suit the regional context. Mirroring the English FE system, FE policy in NI has shifted significantly towards a marketized model and other initiatives have followed suit. For example, when the ‘Skills for Life’ national strategy for improving adult literacy, numeracy and language skills was introduced in England in 2000, Northern Ireland followed two years later with the almost identical ‘Essential Skills for Living’ strategy. The ‘Apprenticeship Strategy’ and the ‘Industrial Strategy’, currently being considered, all have had their genesis in English equivalents. This type of ‘policy borrowing’, conceptualized here as ‘adaptive convergence’, is a pragmatic solution to maintain alignment with UK innovations whilst allowing for local contextualization.

The FE sector response

The multi-campus nature of the FE sector in NI, with 40 campuses embedded in local communities, has had an important role to play in addressing the challenges and difficulties inherent in NI society. Students from all communities progress to FE and one of the key features of the system is the diversity of the learners it attracts, ranging from those with very few or no qualifications, to those who are following higher education (HE) options. For many students, entering the FE sector at age 14 or 16 may be their first opportunity to meet with those from a different community background. This is also true for the FE staff. The colleges therefore have a critical role to play in developing social cohesion.

Given that NI has the largest population of people with no qualifications in the UK (Gunson et al. 2018), colleges also have a crucial role in up-skilling individuals to meet the economic needs of the workforce. It is possible to view emergent trends within the NI system as a distinctive social, economic and educational model; the main features of which are discussed in the following section.

Models of innovation

(i) The Entitlement Framework

The Education Order (NI) Order (2006) introduced the 'Entitlement Framework' into schools to address the academic/vocational dichotomy resultant from the academic selection system at age 11 that is still in place in NI. The aim of the Framework was to provide pupils with access to learning pathways that offer a broader and more flexible curriculum with a blend of courses including traditional academic and vocational courses which best meet their needs, aptitudes, aspirations and interests. Originally, there was a requirement for all schools to provide access to a minimum of 24 courses for 14-16 year olds and a minimum of 27 for 16-19 year olds, although this was reduced to 21 options in 2017. One-third of these courses were meant to be academic, one-third vocational and one-third optional, giving young people a wide range of skills and knowledge ready for the labour market. This was also intended to address the parity of esteem issues between academic and vocational success exacerbated by the grammar/secondary school dichotomy discussed earlier.

As no single institution could deliver the full range of courses on its own, a benefit of the Framework was that schools, regardless of management type, would be required to collaborate, sharing facilities, resources and expertise.

This collaboration would not just take place between individual schools, but also across Area Learning Communities (ALCs) involving secondary and grammar schools as well as FE colleges. The best ALCs would also involve local businesses and industrial partners working together to share resources, disseminate best practice and link cohesively to enhance the learning opportunities and experiences of individuals within their geographical areas.

Over the last few years, significant progress has been made towards delivering the Entitlement Framework and, in many areas, collaboration and local partnership arrangements are enabling choice for young people and guaranteeing them a broad and balanced curriculum which prepares them for the challenges of adulthood. In areas of best practice, the ALCs have been building on already well-established partnership arrangements with FE colleges, schools and other local organisations.

However, implementation has not been without its challenges. The extent to which FE colleges were involved in course provision varied from one area to another and initial evaluations suggested that the resources of the FE sector were not being fully exploited by schools.

‘The FE sector has expert knowledge as well as specialist, industry-standard buildings, equipment and resources to deliver a wide range of professional, technical and applied courses: such courses which are suitable for 14-19 pupils at all levels, up to and including level 4, can and should complement those delivered by schools’ (DENI, 2009: 8).

Other concerns were that there was a greater focus on the numbers of courses expected rather than on quality and coherence and that, while implementation of the Framework is a legislative requirement, the Department of Education avoided imposing sanctions against schools failing to meet the targets. In 2018, a total of 119 out of 202 post-primary providers were found not to be offering the full range of curriculum options (Irish News, 2018). Significant funding reductions to the scheme (in the region of 43.5%) have also been proposed in the context of wider, swingeing cuts overall to the education budget, which have greatly concerned teaching unions and other interested parties and have raised question marks over the continuation of the scheme. Nevertheless, the Entitlement Framework continues to be one of the strategic priorities of the NI government's educational plans and schools, colleges and other stakeholders and partners are working hard to ensure that the original aims of the initiative are developed and implemented. This innovation may also have applicability in other regional areas.

(ii) The Problem-Based Learning Curriculum

Other innovative work of note in the FE sector is being conducted in the South Eastern Regional College (SERC). This FE institution has over 1000 specialist employees with student enrolments of 35,000 in seven campuses across the south eastern area of NI. In 2014, SERC moved towards a 'problem/project based learning' curriculum across all campuses and subject areas. Staff were encouraged to meet together in multi-disciplinary teams to source real-life projects with either external partners or from within the college. The projects were required to be 'activity based with defined and agreed outcomes, specific milestones and resources' (SERC, 2014: 14) which must also meet the assessment criteria of the awarding body.

Since then this approach has been further developed and is now an accepted norm for staff in that college.

The model lends itself well to inculcating skills such as critical thinking, innovation, communication, collaboration, media and ICT literacy and self-regulation in learners as they make the transition from school to working life. In the case of vocational education, it marries the theoretical with the practical. It also supports the Department for Employment's 'Strategic Theme of Economic Development' (DfE, 2016). Each year, during the first week of the September term, the college designates an Enterprise Week where all full-time students compete in a challenge to identify an innovative solution to a specific problem, tailored to each vocational area. Problems are sourced from many local companies who have formed strong links with the college and are keen to have fresh ideas presented to them. The initiative is entitled 'Get the Edge' and is a flagship project for the college.

All this marks a significant departure from traditional induction activities and emphasizes the college's commitment to new working. Students from all subject areas and across all levels are encouraged to take part, forming interdisciplinary groups to discuss specific problems and identify solutions. This project-based learning approach is now a feature of all full-time programmes in the college enabling them to develop skills such as commercial acumen, communication, problem solving and team work as well as inspiring knowledge and raising aspirations, confidence and employability.

The model also has the potential to be developed further and there could be other opportunities to blend educational projects with business projects throughout the year, not just during Enterprise Week as at present. Further openings for work placements with these business and industry partners can be fostered as well as the completion of industry projects, volunteering and the incubation of student companies. The Enterprise Week experiment has embedded the ethos of entrepreneurship within the college. One other added benefit has been that staff have included problem-based methodologies on a micro-basis into their daily classroom practice, harnessing their own specialist industrial experience and displaying their own innovation and creativity.

College statistics (SERC, 2016) suggest that 97 per cent of students enrolled on SERC courses move on to employment, self-employment and further education or training on completion of their course, thus it could be argued that the skills embedded through the 'Get the Edge' initiative at SERC have contributed to increasing their chances of employability. Students' efforts are accredited through a qualification which is embedded in their main programme of study. There has been over 90 per cent achievement in these accredited units and they provide evidence to employers of proficiency beyond the students' main qualification outcome.

Whilst not without its challenges (such as staffing and timetabling), SERC is rightly proud of this pioneering approach and continues to pilot both medium-and large-scale projects across vocational areas, bridging traditional silos by getting teams to work collaboratively. This is an interesting practice which could be rolled out throughout all of the NI regional colleges or in FE contexts more widely.

The British Council (2016) has suggested that international and European developments in this area are also possible.

(iii) Colleges as anchor institutions

One of the largest FE Colleges in NI is Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC) with an enrolment of over 37,000 students across a number of city-centre campuses. The college caters for the education and training needs of the 21st Century with specialist staff and state-of-the-art facilities. It provides support for businesses and prides itself on the innovation and quality of its awards. Its flagship campus is located in the Titanic Quarter of Belfast, creating an exciting learning experience in the heart of a recently developed area which showcases and combines, for an increasingly booming tourist market, the city's cultural and historical development. Based on Queen's Island on the east bank of the River Lagan, the Titanic Quarter has links to the history of the city stretching back to the nineteenth century. An extensive area of the island formed part of Harland and Wolff's shipyard at a time when Belfast was a world centre of maritime trade, shipbuilding and commerce. This shipping line, which built the famous but ill-fated Titanic ship, had provided employment for many over the years but as demand for shipbuilding services dried up and the employment trends turned towards the service industries, the land became free and unused.

The Titanic Quarter covers a 185-acre site and in line with trends in other cities, such as the Docklands area of Dublin and the Greenwich area in London, development was along the river. Arguably, it has been one of the most transformative projects over the last decade and is a tangible symbol of the potential for the city in the modern era. Since 2006, over £328m has been invested and the area is now a diverse mix of residential, tourism, retail, employment, learning, transport and cultural projects.

As well as accommodating the major learning facilities of Belfast Met, the area is also home to Citibank, Audi and the Northern Ireland Science Park.

When the college relocated to this new £44 million campus in September 2011, it acted like a magnet, drawing important organisations and businesses to what was once an unloved and unlovable part of the city, forming a critical mass which attracted and continues to attract other high profile tenants. The Titanic Maritime Museum opened in 2012 and was voted as the ‘best tourist attraction’ at the World Travel Awards in 2016 (Belfast Telegraph, 2016) while the Titanic Hotel (opened in 2017) and the George Best City Hotel (opened in 2018) continue to build on the city’s growing attraction as a leading tourist destination.

However, it is important to note that Belfast Met does not just occupy this important site and bring learners into the heart of the city. In fact, it is much more than just a sitting tenant, working as it does with the surrounding and local industries to meet their diverse needs (BMC, 2018). For example, the staff and management for these new hotels were all trained at the college and it provides an important incubator function for businesses who have new product ideas and seek innovative support for growth. The college works extensively with business partners and its award winning Business Development Team is dedicated to enterprise, economic development and employability, offering a huge portfolio of programmes and services, including training, mentoring, business support initiatives, consultancy, student projects, student placement and strategic graduate programmes. The team also works with numerous local, national and international business support agencies and constantly builds on its networks of enterprise organisations and employers.

It provides apprenticeships to local businesses and several of their alumni have gone on to work in the surrounding enterprises and throughout NI.

This institutional case study outlines how an anchor tenant, such as Belfast Met, can bring life to a locality which was previously unused and underdeveloped. It can bring youth to that area, through the large influx of students attending on a daily basis, and it can bring vibrancy and innovation through its work with local businesses and local entrepreneurs. These developments show what the FE sector in NI is capable of and serve to outline its role in promoting commercial and social cohesion in a much wider context.

Reflections on FE and skills in NI – the role of an adaptive small-scale educational, social and economic model

The constitutional position of NI and issues of identity and allegiance dominate society and take precedence over other factors in decision-making on issues of major importance and NI continues to be a deeply divided society. The FE sector is part of a segregated educational system, divided by religion, ability, gender and class, and so participation trends and student pathways must be seen within the demands of this wider framework. Participating within an FE college is often the first-time learners have come into contact with those from another religion and the sector has adapted to implicitly address social cohesion. However, in a context where success is viewed as academic achievement and progression to higher education, FE could be conceptualized as having an ‘identity crisis’. It is still seen as a lower-status route and, in an education system where success is still in many ways defined as academic qualifications, FE is not a first-choice option for many school-leavers.

In a relatively small 'market' it has to compete with the universities for higher education students and with the school sector for vocational and post-compulsory provision. In comparison with the very clear 'College' identity in Scotland the NI FE sector, despite the formation of its six sub-regionally based institutions, is not yet clearly defined.

However, there is much that deserves recognition in the NI FE sector which has become a significant educational provider and employer and has contributed to the emergence of a small-scale but innovative educational, social and economic model. Throughout the NI 'Troubles' it has provided an integrated learning space in an otherwise divided society, developing provision to encourage social cohesion and community development in a country transitioning in a post-conflict environment. The impact in communities has been strong and colleges remain embedded in the communities they serve. Innovation (such as the project based pedagogies outlined in the SERC case study) has flourished in spite of the challenges and the sector remains extremely ambitious.

Evidence has been presented here of 'policy borrowing' and there is no doubt that policy-makers still look to the English model for direction. However, being a 'follower' in some sense, has allowed time for critique and adaptation and policies have been 'adapted' to ensure they meet the regional economic and social needs to address the strategic priorities, outlined in Governmental strategic policies. It is these adaptations that may be particularly relevant to other countries and regions of the UK that continue to experience challenges of educational, social and economic inclusion.

Additionally, this paper has highlighted future challenges. At the time of writing the devolved government remains collapsed, leaving key decisions (such as the Apprenticeship Levy and Industrial Strategy) unable to progress without ministerial approval. Currently, there appears to be no solution to this impasse and with the country deeply divided over Brexit and other national issues, a general pessimism pervades.

It will be interesting, therefore, to continue documenting how these difficulties will be addressed and the role the FE sector in NI with its unique educational, social and economic model calibrated to a regional scale.

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