

Establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory panel to guide teaching, research and collaborations in the tertiary setting: Our school's reflections



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Abstract

This discussion paper outlines the process undertaken by the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work to establish an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory panel (AP). Guided by the School's strategic commitment to fostering two-way learning between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and non-Indigenous staff, students and community members, the initiative explored the potential of an Elder in Residence role. Strategic funding enabled a roundtable discussion with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nurses, midwives and social work practitioners, who provided critical insights into the preferred structure and purpose of such a role. Participants advocated for an AP, rather than a single Elder in Residence, to reflect the diversity of disciplines within the School. The formation of the AP represents a meaningful step towards decolonising education and research. It embeds First Nations authority, supports ethical research practices and reorients the epistemological foundations of nursing, midwifery and social work to honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing.

Keywords: Decolonising education; First Nations knowledge systems; Two-way learning; Allied health curriculum; Nursing; Midwifery

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Highlights

- The establishment of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory panel is a strategic and values-driven initiative to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership within a tertiary education setting.
- The advisory panel provides a mechanism for decolonising curriculum, pedagogy and research across nursing, midwifery, social work and counselling disciplines.
- This initiative supports ethical engagement and truth-telling by honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing.
- The process reflects a shift from externally imposed models to genuine partnership and co-design with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners, community leaders and Elders.
- The paper contributes to broader conversations about decolonisation in higher education, offering a practical example of structural change grounded in equity and social justice.

Introduction

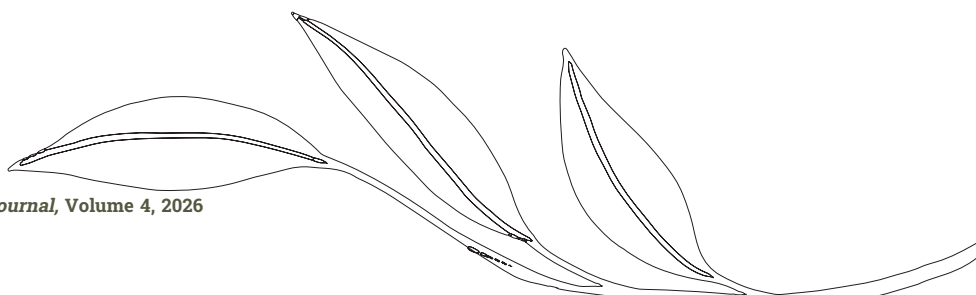
This descriptive paper details the University of Queensland's (UQ) School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work's (NMSW) process in developing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander¹ advisory panel (AP) for the School. The UQ is a Group of Eight university (a coalition of Australia's eight leading research-intensive universities) with the principal campus in St Lucia within the Meanjin (Brisbane) metropolitan region. It is a beautiful sandstone university nestled alongside Maiwar (the Brisbane River). Across all Australian universities, there is a growing awareness and need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership at all levels – from Vice Chancellor and Faculty Executive through to individual teaching disciplines or schools ([Universities Australia 2022](#)). Within UQ, the number of people who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander amongst staff and students is growing, and representation is strengthening with targeted resources such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit. These

factors were the catalyst to the concept of convening an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander School AP. This paper describes the process undertaken to establish the AP for the School of NMSW and does not seek to evaluate the outcomes or impact of the roundtable discussion or the implementation of the AP.

Background

UQ is committed to reconciliation and aims to build a united, inclusive and respectful community. The University's Strategic Plan (2022–25) includes the goal of 'play(ing) a leading role in reconciliation as advocates with and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities' ([UQ 2022](#), p.11). The University is partnered with Reconciliation Australia ([UQ 2024](#), p.3). The recent launch of the Stretch Reconciliation Action Plan (Stretch RAP) builds on the original RAP endorsed by Reconciliation Australia in 2018 ([UQ 2024](#), p.2). The Stretch RAP focuses on strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership within the organisation and further developing actions, targets and goals ([UQ 2024](#)). These are all aiming to capture measurable outcomes illustrating how the UQ community aims to act with respect, integrity and truth.

¹Please refer to the Disclaimer at the end of this paper for an explanation of the terminology used throughout, including the use of 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' and 'First Nations'.





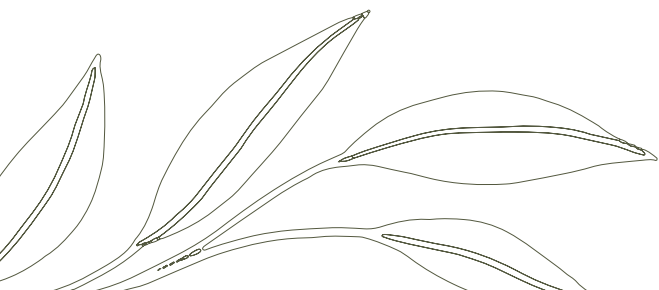
The School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work sits within the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Behavioural Sciences (HMBS). The School's Strategic Plan 2023–25 includes a number of statements across domains of teaching and research that aim to strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation. An example of this is the aim to 'Embed Indigenous knowledges and ways into our curricula of nursing, midwifery, social work, and counselling' (School of NMSW 2023, p.1). Perhaps the most ambitious aim is to 'Explore the opportunity for an Indigenous Elder in Residence role to enhance two-way learning opportunities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff, students, and community members' (School of NMSW 2023, p.2). This aim is considered ambitious because establishing an Elder in Residence role requires genuine and sustained relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, careful cultural governance and significant institutional commitment. The role carries cultural authority and has implications across curriculum, research and community engagement, making it a complex and far-reaching initiative for the School.

Decolonising education and research

Decolonisation within the tertiary setting is a values-based concept that is grounded in the principles of equity and social justice and aims to enhance First Nations knowledges and governance (Tamtik 2025). Decolonisation involves a critical review of curricula, its underpinning philosophy, pedagogy and associated learning materials (Mackinlay and Barney 2012). The next step in decolonising education is rebuilding the curricula to deconstruct power relations, challenging power hierarchies, truth-telling and applying a strengths-based paradigm. This School recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise in leading and guiding the process of Indigenising

curricula and learning for future nurses, midwives, social workers and counsellors (School of NMSW 2023; Commonwealth of Australia 2014; Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives [CATSINaM] 2017). The Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra) cultural safety requirements also provide a key regulatory driver for embedding First Nations knowledges and culturally safe practices within curriculum, reinforcing the imperative for decolonising approaches in professional education (Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra), 2022).

The School also acknowledges First Nations expertise within research and applying frameworks for research protocols. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), 2020 emphasises the principles of self-determination, cultural integrity and the right of Indigenous peoples to be engaged as leaders and decision-makers in research. Similarly, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Ethical Conduct in Research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders (2018) and Keeping Research on Track II (2018) highlight the importance of respect, reciprocity, benefit and responsibility in all research activities. These frameworks stress that ethical research requires more than compliance – it demands structural mechanisms for First Nations initiation, authority, oversight and participation. Academics within the School respectfully apply these frameworks, but there was a recognised need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise, oversight and perspectives to build into the School's infrastructure to authentically achieve the School's Strategic Plan.





Colonial load and cultural responsibility

A critical aspect of decolonising work within universities is recognising the uneven labour created by colonial structures and the cultural responsibilities carried by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. Colonial load refers to the additional, often invisible, workload placed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff as a result of institutional systems and expectations, rather than from culture itself (Thompson 2025). The term cultural load is commonly used in higher education, although for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples it implies that culture is the burden, when in reality it is the ongoing colonial structures and processes that create the additional labour. Within universities, colonial load includes tasks such as navigating complex human resources systems to ensure that community members are paid appropriately for their contributions, organising events for days of significance, and carrying responsibility for all aspects of these activities, from minute taking at meetings and logistics to recruiting support and facilitating events. Colonial load also includes the expectation that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff will act as the cultural authority on all matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. This often manifests in colleagues seeking advice, clarification or endorsement on issues they could, and should, research or reflect on themselves. These requests are usually made with good intent, yet they create an additional and uninvited burden by positioning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff as responsible for guiding others in cultural learning, correcting misunderstandings or speaking on behalf of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Such expectations not only add to workload, but also risk reducing the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to a single voice.

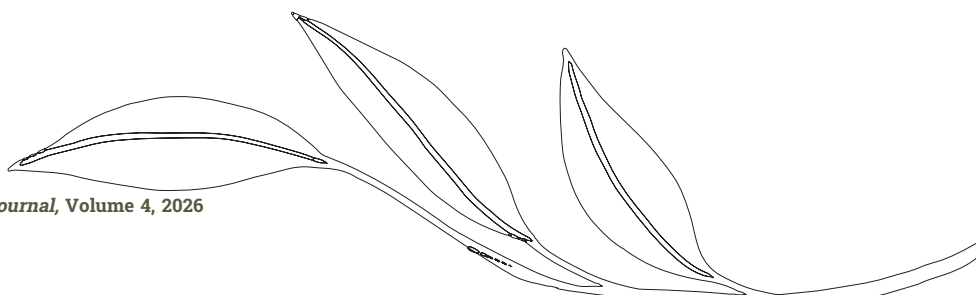
In contrast, cultural responsibility refers to the work of upholding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing, including relationality, relational accountability and reciprocity. Colonial load often limits the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to fulfil these cultural responsibilities. Reducing this burden requires non-Indigenous colleagues to act as genuine allies by sharing the colonial load so that First Nations staff can focus on the relational and cultural work that strengthens teaching, learning and research. Creating this space enables us to challenge colonial practices and contribute to the ongoing decolonisation of education and research. These considerations highlighted the importance of creating a dedicated space to explore how the School might address these challenges, which informed the design of the roundtable discussion.

Developing the roundtable discussion

An internal funding opportunity provided the catalyst to explore the potential for an Elder in Residence role for the School. Preliminary conversations with executive level Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics within UQ provided a framework for a workshop to discuss the role and scope of the position. Additionally, this consultation helped identify essential stakeholders, including nursing, midwifery and social work community leaders and Elders. The School's senior leadership team (SLT) inclusive of the Head of School and current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were also invited to the roundtable discussion. A suitable venue on campus and catering (from a local Aboriginal-led private business) was organised.

The roundtable discussion

The participants were asked to work collaboratively and address a series of questions (see Table). The first





Discussion theme	Questions posed to participants
Purpose of the role/group	What would be the purpose of the role/group within the School?
Aims and objectives	What are the aims/objectives of the role/group?
Membership composition	Who should be included in the role/group? How many people should be included?
Liaison process	What should the liaison process be between the School and the person/group?
Naming the group	What should we call the group?
Selection and appointment	What should the selection and appointment process be?
Benefits of participation	How can members benefit from participating?
Meeting frequency	How often should the group meet?
Term of appointment	How long should the term of appointment be?

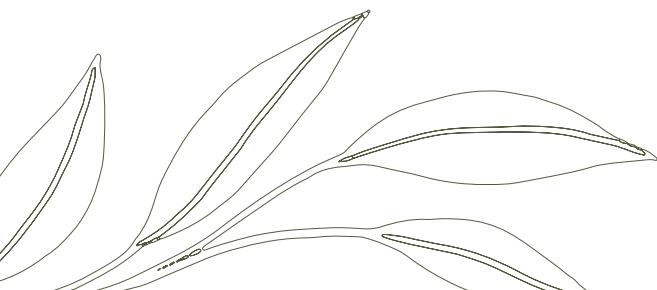
Table: Roundtable discussion questions for establishing an Elder in Residence/group within the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work

round of questions focused on exploring broader concepts: what would the role encompass, what are the aims of this initiative and how would it be articulated with School professional and academic staff? The participants also discussed at length whether a single Elder or a panel/group would better suit the needs of the School. The group consensus was a panel of three to four knowledge holders. There was agreement that the name of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander AP (hereafter referred to as AP) would be best decided at their first meeting. There was consensus amongst the participants that the name of the AP would be organically generated by the AP rather than be imposed. The term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander AP would be used until this time. Participants' discussions emphasised the importance of the panel also establishing terms of reference for the AP. To support this process, a basic template will be provided but the details will be populated by the panel over the first couple of meetings and then tabled at the School's SLT meeting.

The participants reconvened after a break, and the discussion focused on finer details of the proposed panel, including the selection and appointment process. Consensus was that the initial steps would involve selective recruitment; identifying respected

persons in the local community that have contemporary context for the range of disciplines within the School. Details around duration of tenure and meeting frequency were also discussed. Participants agreed that quarterly meetings would have sufficient regularity to: (1) meet the needs of the School; and (2) maintain a connection with the School. Panel members would be invited to attend School events throughout the year, as a demonstration of the School's commitment to reciprocity and relationality. A commitment of one year with the option to extend for an additional year would suit most potential panel members and support continuity. Agreement was achieved on the topic of administrative support in the form of a nominated secretariat from within the existing professional administration team. This role would liaise between School staff and the AP, managing meeting logistics including invitations, room bookings, minute taking and distribution of documents.

The participants discussed at length the potential benefits of participation in the AP. Financial remuneration is essential, paying fairly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges. The University has an existing policy on remunerating consumers, but this AP brings expertise, so the participants all agreed that this needs to be recognised in the level of





remuneration. Early discussions with Human Resources support payment through an honorarium. Additional benefits of participation in the AP include access to UQ resources, potential support to undertake a Higher Education Academy Fellowship, connections with researchers and teaching focused academics within the School, and ongoing adjunct status.

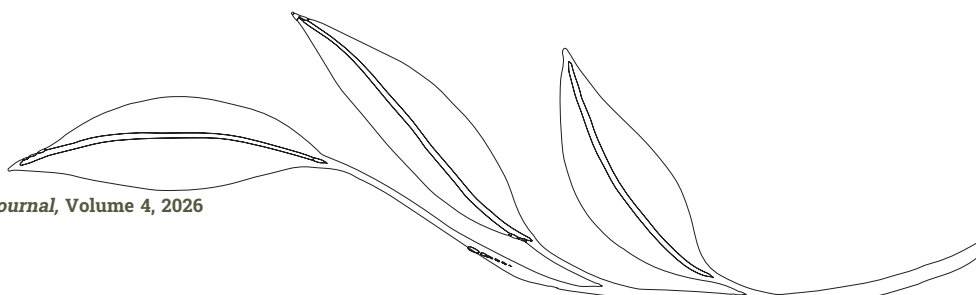
Post-roundtable discussion

All comments from participants were analysed and summarised following the roundtable discussion workshop. The summary table was distributed to all participants for content validation. Additional feedback was collated into a summary document, which was then tabled at the School's SLT meeting.

The roundtable discussion provided valuable insights into the need for a collective and representative panel, rather than a single Elder in Residence, to guide the School's varied disciplines. While these practical recommendations are central to shaping the AP's structure, it is also important to situate this initiative within the broader educational and ethical context. Within the 'decolonial turn' in higher education, scholars such as Walter [Mignolo \(2011; 2012\)](#) argue that coloniality continues to shape education systems through Eurocentric knowledge hierarchies that marginalise Indigenous ways of knowing. True decolonisation therefore requires 'epistemic delinking' ([Mignolo 2007](#), p.460), a conscious move away from privileging Western frameworks and towards 'pluriversality' ([Mignolo 2007](#), p.452), where multiple knowledges are recognised as equally valid ([Tamtik 2025; Zembylas 2025](#)). In this sense, decolonisation is not about adding First Nations content into existing structures, but transforming the foundations of curriculum, research and institutional practice.

Establishing an AP is not only a structural decision for the School but one that progresses the School's strategy. Establishment of the AP also supports a wider commitment to decolonising education and aligning with national ethical frameworks for research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. For professional disciplines such as nursing, midwifery and social work, this transformation is particularly urgent. These fields intersect with First Nations health, wellbeing and community life. There is therefore a responsibility to ensure that education and research are guided by Indigenous voices and perspectives. Establishing a standing AP responds to this responsibility by embedding First Nations leadership into the structures of the School, ensuring that curriculum development, research design and engagement strategies are shaped in partnership rather than imposed externally. Importantly, this collective approach responds to critiques that warn against tokenism or 'ethno-essentialism' ([Zembylas 2025](#), p.3; [Naicker 2023](#), p.222), by recognising the diversity of voices and expertise within First Nations communities.

At the time this project commenced, the Faculty of HMBS was newly formed (to commence in January 2025), and had recently appointed its inaugural Associate Dean (Indigenous Engagement). As part of establishing Indigenous governance structures within the new faculty, the Associate Dean was developing a Wisdom Council for Indigenous Knowledges ([The University of Queensland \(UQ\), n.d.](#)). The council provides strategic cultural guidance and contributes to a co-designed framework intended to embed Indigenous perspectives across Faculty priorities. Through this work, Blak health is positioned as central to the Faculty's mission, emphasising that responsibility for this work is shared by all staff and students ([The University of Queensland \(UQ\), n.d.](#)). The





roundtable discussion provided an opportunity to identify which School-level initiatives or governance mechanisms would be most appropriate to develop in alignment with the emerging wisdom council.

Next steps

The AP is both a response to strategic priorities and a tangible step towards decolonising education and research. It provides a mechanism for embedding First Nations authority, supporting ethical research, and reshaping the knowledge foundations of nursing, midwifery and social work in ways that honour First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing. This discussion paper describes the initial phase of establishing a sustainable model of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership within the School. By focusing on this developmental stage, the paper creates an opportunity to lay the groundwork for future scholarship that will examine the implementation and impact of the AP. While some elements of this process are specific to the institutional context, many of the principles – such as centring First Nations authority, creating culturally safe structures and engaging in relational decision-making – are transferable to other schools and universities seeking to undertake similar work.

The next steps will involve implementing the AP and progressing the journey to incorporate Indigenous leadership, knowledges and perspectives into the School, with future work to share experiences of this implementation.

Author contributions

This project was led by KT and JJ-C. All authors made significant contributions to the creation of this manuscript. All authors approved the final manuscript prior to submission for publication. KT and JJ-C:

conceptualisation, writing – original draft, review and editing, funding acquisition, project administration.

Declaration of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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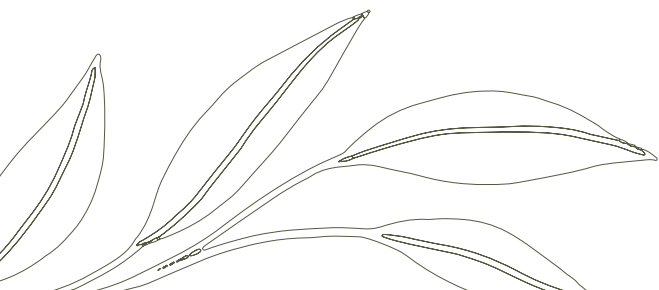
The roundtable discussion was supported by funding made available through the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work at The University of Queensland.

Disclaimer

We respectfully utilise the term ‘First Nations’ to refer to Indigenous Peoples and First Peoples inhabiting or existing in a land from the earliest times, or before the arrival of colonists. When referring to the Traditional Custodians of this land, now known as Australia, we use the specific terms ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’. We recognise the diversity and sovereignty of each nation/language group and use these terms with care and respect.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we conducted the roundtable discussion, the lands on which we work and write this paper, the Turrbal and Yuggera Peoples. We acknowledge their ongoing connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to ancestors who have cared for this land for thousands of years, which has created the opportunity for us to be here today. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and future. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded.





We acknowledge our positionalities and the institutional power dynamics that shape this work, recognising the responsibilities we each carry, as a Gooreng Gooreng and Yuggera woman, and a non-Indigenous ally working within the academy, and living and working on Turrbal and Yuggera land. In doing so, we are mindful of how colonial load and cultural responsibility are experienced differently across our roles, and we offer this reflexive statement to strengthen transparency and relational accountability, particularly in relation to the roles of non-Indigenous leadership and authorship in supporting, rather than directing, the development of the AP.

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Author Biographies

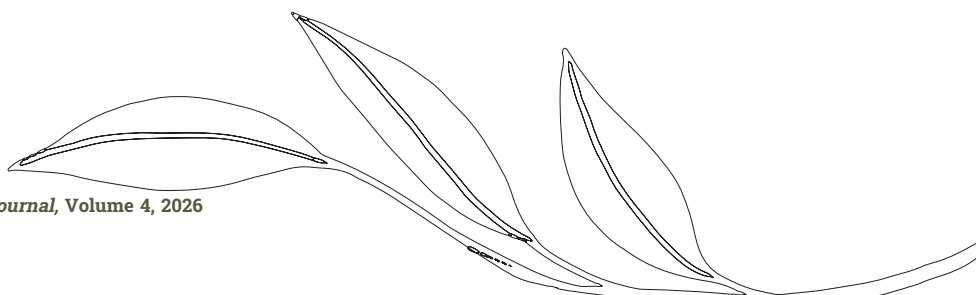
Kate Thompson, a Gooreng Gooreng and Yuggera woman, is a lecturer in health and social work at the University of Queensland (UQ). Kate's teaching and research focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing, cultural safety, cultural identity and connection, and out-of-home care. After completing her Bachelor of Social Work (Honours) at UQ, Kate worked in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisation in a foster and kinship care team, and then a senior practitioner role, improving child and family services. Kate's PhD explored how cultural identity and connection are supported and maintained for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care.

Jacqueline Jauncey-Cooke is a senior lecturer in nursing at the University of Queensland. A non-

Indigenous woman living on Turrbal and Jagera land, she grew up on Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country and holds a deep connection with Ntaria and Mparntwe. Her teaching and research focus on child and family-centred care, workforce development, and improving nursing education through fostering critical thinking and empathy. Jacqueline regularly contributes to international journals and conferences, and supports research and higher degree students. She is committed to advancing compassionate, culturally responsive care and strengthening interprofessional education.

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