



From Creative Catalysts' Observations to Insight: The Departmental Leadership Factor in Enhancing Academic Excellence in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

¹Ajayi, Olayemi T. & ²Omisakin, Funke-Wale T.

¹Department of Art and Design, The Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro, Ogun State, Nigeria

¹Olayemi.ajayi@federalpolyilaro.edu.ng

²Department of Art and Design, Osun State Polytechnic, Iree, Osun State, Nigeria

Abstract

This study delves into the critical role of departmental leadership in fostering academic excellence in Nigerian tertiary institutions, focusing on insights from creative catalysts, such as art experts and seasoned faculty members. Anchored by the Transformational Leadership Theory and Academic Capital Theory, it examines how effective leadership and academic capital contribute to academic excellence. The research, based on extensive experience and observations in Nigerian tertiary institutions, utilized covert observations of the researchers as well as observations of 250 selected participants across five tertiary institutions in Southwest Nigeria obtained through unstructured interviews. Findings underscored that departmental leaders embodying transformational qualities like vision, communication, and empowerment tend to cultivate cultures of academic excellence. However, challenges arise from privileges allowing leaders to instruct faculty to grant unearned marks, negatively impacting education quality and oversight. Excesses like power abuse, nepotism, and favoritism were noted, harming academic standards and eroding faculty trust. The study stressed the need for training departmental leaders in transformational leadership, enhancing academic capital to support research and teaching, addressing power abuses through policy reviews, and implementing leadership development programs. It advocates for transparent, inclusive, and collaborative leadership alongside robust accountability mechanisms to uphold academic quality and foster innovation across Nigerian tertiary institutions.

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Introduction

Academic excellence is the hallmark of higher education institutions worldwide (Gurau, 2019; Lindsay, 2012; Mignot-Gérard, 2011), and Nigerian tertiary institutions are no exception. The importance of academic excellence cannot be overstated, as it is crucial for producing graduates who can compete globally and contribute to national development (Marginson, 2006; Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Rao, Sabat, & Sharma, 2016). However, the quality of education in Nigerian tertiary institutions has been a subject of concern.

In recent years, with issues such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, and weak institutional governance hindering the achievement of academic excellence (Edet & Ekpoh, 2017).

Effective departmental leadership is critical to enhancing academic excellence in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Departmental leaders play a pivotal role in fostering academic excellence by providing vision, direction, and support to faculty members (Willett, 2015; Quinsee & Parker, 2017). They can inspire and motivate faculty members to achieve exceptional performance and build academic capital, which is essential for faculty members'



research and teaching activities (Wollersheim, Lenz, Welpé, & Spörrle, 2015; Wilkesmann, 2021; Bess, 1997). Academic capital refers to the social and cultural capital that faculty members possess, which enables them to access resources, networks, and opportunities (Print, 2010).

In Nigeria, departmental leadership faces numerous challenges, including inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, and weak institutional governance (Afolabi, 2022). Furthermore, departmental leaders may abuse their power and privilege, which can undermine academic quality and erode faculty trust (Binder, Friedli, & Fuentes-Afflick, 2016). The abuse of power and privilege can take many forms, including nepotism, favoritism, and corrupt practices, which can create a toxic academic environment and hinder academic excellence (Jacob & Lawan, 2020).

Moreover, the lack of effective departmental leadership can lead to a lack of accountability, transparency, and inclusivity in academic decision-making, which can further undermine academic excellence (Gumport, 2012). Therefore, it is essential to investigate the departmental leadership factor in enhancing academic excellence in Nigerian tertiary institutions. This study aims to explore the role of departmental leadership in fostering academic excellence and identify the challenges and opportunities for effective departmental leadership in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

This study draws on the theory of transformational leadership, which posits that leaders can inspire and motivate faculty members to achieve exceptional performance (Alzoraiki et al., 2023; Kohteers & Terborg, 1995; Dionne, Yammarino, Atwater, & Spangler, 2004). We also draw on the concept of academic capital, which highlights the importance of social and cultural capital in academic settings (Gan, 2023; Ciftci & Karada, 2022; Ghaffari & Khani, 2013). Our study is based on our collective observations and experiences as faculty members and scholars in Nigerian tertiary institutions spanning decades. To further deepen the depth of the study's findings, we conducted unstructured interviews for selected participants, deployed covert observations of purposively selected participants across five different tertiary institutions in Southwest Nigeria, focusing on

instances of effective and ineffective departmental leadership. Southwest Nigeria comprises of 6 States including: Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Ondo and Osun States.

Transformational Leadership Theory, propounded by James MacGregor Burns (1978) and further developed by Bernard Bass (1985), posits that leaders can inspire and motivate faculty members to achieve exceptional performance. This theory is highly relevant to the study as it highlights the importance of effective departmental leadership in fostering academic excellence. The theory's core principles, such as vision, communication, empowerment, and innovation, align with the study's findings on the qualities of effective departmental leaders. By adopting transformational leadership practices, departmental leaders can create a culture of academic excellence, innovation, and collaboration, ultimately enhancing the quality of education and research in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Academic Capital Theory, developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), emphasizes the significance of social and cultural capital in academic settings. This theory is crucial to the study as it underscores the importance of building academic capital to support faculty members' research and teaching activities. The theory posits that academic capital encompasses the social connections, cultural knowledge, and symbolic goods that facilitate academic success. In the context of the study, academic capital is essential for departmental leaders to foster a culture of collaboration, innovation, and excellence. By prioritizing the development of academic capital, institutions can empower faculty members to excel in their research and teaching activities, ultimately enhancing academic quality and excellence. Both Transformational Leadership Theory and Academic Capital Theory offer valuable insights into the importance of effective departmental leadership and academic capital in fostering academic excellence in Nigerian tertiary institutions. By integrating these two theories, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of the departmental leadership factor in enhancing academic excellence in Nigerian tertiary institutions, providing recommendations for departmental leaders,

policymakers, and other stakeholders to promote academic excellence.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the impact of departmental leadership on academic excellence in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The study thrives on the non-fictional observations and experiences of the authors. In boosting the depth of the study, apart from the authors’ observations and experiences, the need to mine from third parties’ observations and experiences became necessitated. Hence, a purposive sampling strategy was used to select 50 participants each from five different tertiary institutions in Southwest Nigeria; altogether 250 participants were selected. Data collection involved unstructured interviews and observations of the authors vis-à-vis various students and faculty members’ observations and experiences on departmental leadership not exempting the content analysis of relevant excerpts from the Nigeria 1999 constitution. Thematic analysis was used to identify and categorise themes related to effective and ineffective departmental leadership and faculty activities.

The study adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring participant rights and anonymity. Data collection tools included a reflective journal, an observation checklist, and audio/video recorders. The methodology combined covert observations, interviews, thematic analysis, and reflective journaling to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research question.

The study was conducted by relying on the observations and experience of the researchers with the ones mined from the 250 participants interviewed across the selected tertiary institutions in southwest Nigeria, which comprises six states (Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo). These states are known for their rich cultural heritage, historic landmarks, and natural resources. Lagos is a major commercial hub, while the other states offer scenic beauty, traditional craftsmanship, and warm hospitality.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants: Age

	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18-34	40%
	35-44	30%
	45-54	20%
	55-64	10%

Table 2: Gender of Participants

Gender	Male	60%
	Female	40%
Department	Arts	30%
	Sciences	40%
	Humanities	30%

Using 250 participants, that were engaged across five selected tertiary institutions within Southwest, Nigeria, we can calculate the actual number of participants in each category:

1. Age:
 1. 25-34: 40% of 250 = 100 participants
 2. 35-44: 30% of 250 = 75 participants
 3. 45-54: 20% of 250 = 50 participants
 4. 55-64: 10% of 250 = 25 participants
2. Gender:
 1. Male: 60% of 250 = 150 participants
 2. Female: 40% of 250 = 100 participants
3. Department:
 1. Arts: 30% of 250 = 75 participants
 2. Sciences: 40% of 250 = 100 participants
 3. Humanities: 30% of 250 = 75 participants

Results

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the departmental leadership factor in

enhancing academic excellence in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The findings are presented below, categorized into effective and ineffective departmental leadership practices, faculty members' teaching and research activities, and students' experiences.

- ***Effective Departmental Leadership Practices***

Through the observations from the participants retrieved through unstructured interviews, 75% (188) of the participants attested to being productive through the effective leadership mostly at the inception of their departmental heads' office tenure. It was also uncovered that departmental leaders who demonstrated transformational leadership qualities, such as vision, communication, and empowerment, foster a culture of staff productivity and academic excellence. These leaders were able to inspire and motivate faculty members to achieve exceptional performance, and created an environment that supported innovation, creativity, and critical thinking for both students and faculty members; which is in direct alignment with the findings from (Jameel, & Ahmad, 2021; as well as Duyan, & Yıldız, 2020). For instance, about 60% (140) of the respondents informed that their departmental leaders established a mentorship program that paired junior faculty members with senior colleagues, which led to significant improvements in teaching and research quality.

Ineffective Departmental Leadership

Through the strategic probe carried out on the participants, 96% (240) of the participants admitted to having ever experienced various excesses and ineffectiveness of departmental leadership. Ineffective departmental leadership practices undermine the quality of education and erode faculty trust. Departmental leaders who abused their power and privilege, engaged in nepotism and favoritism, and prioritized personal interests over academic excellence created a toxic academic environment characterized by fear, intimidation, and demotivation, which hindered faculty members' ability to teach and conduct research effectively. For instance, from the various confessions of the participants and extracts from

our individual observations, it could be deduced that there are various cases that hinge around the ideology of departmental heads instructing the faculty members to award marks undeservedly to underperformed students, which signals a huge threat to the integrity of academia. On the other hand, another ineffective departmental leadership practice scouted through observations is the inhumanity of most heads. About 86% of the participants confided that they had never received relevant consumables, from departmental heads, which their schools' management usually release funds for every semester. The consumables are the teaching aids that would enable faculty members to foster quality academic delivery, which usually causes them to turn what was supposed to be a purely practical session into a theoretical session, dwindling the quality of education. One of the participants confided that since the beginning of the department until almost a decade, their head of department has been collecting the consumables allowance without providing the consumables across the entire few units of the department. The said member further confided in the researchers that what the participant observed was the fact that the departmental head has been leveraging on fake receipts to record consumables that were never procured in deceiving the auditing unit of the institution. Meanwhile, the participant said: "Unfortunately, there was no way such departmental head could have been reported, since every complaint will still have to be conveyed through the erring head to higher authorities". This signals the need for a more inclusive operation that will allow more transparency either through whistle blowing or anonymous messages which will allow members at all levels to communicate their concerns without the fear of the unknown. Similarly, other detailed submissions from the participants also reflect that some departmental leaders overly indulge the students at the detriment of the faculty members, with autocratic gestures to humiliate any faculty member who stands to be just and upright in maintaining academic integrity required for achieving quality education. If this should be left unattended to, the lingering effects could attenuate the standard of education and it could potentially keep skyrocketing the rate of unemployment unwaveringly. Since both the



serious students and the unserious ones are allowed to convoke on the basis of success rate adherence, they would end up graduating, when they do, the serious ones may potentially be stranded detrimentally as the unserious ones may buy their way through or doing unimaginable things in getting employment opportunities; while their serious counterparts keep struggling to be employed. Consequently, it becomes a misplaced priority to have the serious students to be unemployed while the unserious ones are employed. When this happens, the unserious students who were not properly schooled would be unproductive and that will make the industry to erroneously assume that most of the Nigerian graduates are not credible and employable; sending shame to the academia.

- **Toxic Academic Environment and Unhealthy Competition**

Further probe revealed that there is unhealthy competition that thrives in the educational system, which hinges on success rate syndrome. From the authors' observations and with the contributions of the respondents, it has been observed that departments whose records show a 100% success rate are usually misconceived to be the most diligent departments, while on the other hand, those departments with lesser success rates are misconceived to be underperforming departments. And as a result, the heads of departments with low success rates, who are usually high-end in ensuring there is absolute academic integrity, are usually either despised or placed under pressure. Hence, this has lured many departmental heads into frustration vis-à-vis unhealthy competition, which usually allows them to use the statutory right of being able to instruct lecturers to generate undeserved marks for students in order to fit in the caucus of performing departments. The continuity of this typical situation will not only impair the quality of education; it will also erode a competent workforce, which could result in a high rate of unemployment, which comes with a possible economic menace.

- **Abuse of Office and Lack of Inclusive Operations**

From an interactive probe carried out among the students, the researchers observed that most students do not know the names of their departmental heads, while some students admitted not having had their departmental heads address them before. This is likely to exist because the departmental heads who are expected to put up various mechanisms to ensure their students are committed to academic pursuits throughout the semester can just fold their arms on the understanding that regardless of what happens, any student that fails, the faculty member will be instructed to do otherwise (pass the student); this is a pure misplaced priority. *Ceteris Paribus*, if the students were encouraged, monitored, and inspired by their departmental head for the students to be committed to their studies, this would result in more commitments from the students in terms of lecture attendance, course work, field work, tests, etc., and as a result, there would be no need for the departmental leaders to pressurize their faculty members into the unethical practice of awarding undeserved marks to students all in the name of painting a false image of being a performing department to their management. Thus, the act has been overly prevalent in most departments across the selected tertiary institutions in Southwest Nigeria, as affirmed by 75% of the participants. Therefore, if this menace in academia is left unchecked, it could cause more damage to the Nigerian educational sector, with adverse effects on varying industries. Also, through the unstructured interviews carried out, vis-à-vis the researchers' observations and experiences, it was gathered that most departmental faculty members are working in a cumbersome and unhealthy environment as a result of poor, inclusive operations, such as a situation where some faculty members have no channel to liberally pour out their earnest thoughts and revolt against unjust and other facets of corrupt practices from their departmental heads. Hence, all of these have been parts of the strongholds that have been impeding the quality and integrity of the Nigerian educational system.

Similarly, abuse of office by departmental heads was also recorded in the probe carried out among various departments. The head of department, being overly saddled with the responsibility to recruit faculty members for both existing and new



programs, usually ends up the one to favor his or her hailers and/or loyalists, who are mostly weaklings, into the departments, and this comes with multifaceted side effects. Due to the low self-esteem of some departmental heads, they, more often than not, find it difficult to submit the names of faculty members with soaring records of achievements for appointments as a way of shielding themselves from every form of healthy competition. A backup proof for this is the submissions recorded by a faculty member who confided that there was one time someone from another neighboring institution applied to their department for a sabbatical leave. But, as a result of the fact that their head of department was still a senior lecturer, he felt it would be humiliating to have someone of the applicant's status in the department. The opportunity that the rector of the institution gave him (the HOD) to get the applicant's CV and certify the applicant's suitability was all that the head of department leveraged to turn down the applicant by making false remarks. Despite the fact that the concerned staffer has already told the HOD about the applicant and being a household name in the profession, Similarly, this low self-esteem is instrumental for some HODs to be practicing an autocratic style of leadership (all power belongs to me) instead of enabling other members to be active by engaging them in some leadership roles within the department, which will help in breeding excellent leaders who could emerge as successors or other leaders within the faculty, institution, or beyond sooner or later.

On another account of excesses from HODs, a participant also remarked that for the years spent in their department, there has never been a day the HOD gave the financial report of their departmental account where every graduating student has been paying for damages year in, year out. The participant further said there was one of the members who once asked about the fund, but he was shunned.

On another account of excess from heads of departments, a participant submitted a retrospective account revealing that the majority of staff in the participant's department came through the head of department, and in show of appreciation, the HOD is treated like a god. The implication of this is that

after bowing out of office or retiring, the successor might find it difficult to thrive, as the loyalties of the majority of staff have already been usurped by the single person who brought them into the system.

Similarly, another participant confided that there have been several accounts where the allowance appropriated for the department by the school management to procure consumables for enhancement of curriculum delivery across the units of the department every semester has been absorbed by the head of department without procuring any consumables, only to use fake receipts and other camouflages to present non-existing tools and materials to the auditing unit of the institution. The participant also confided that the head of department usually uses serial gifts for the management members to carve an unquestionable image, making it difficult to trace any shortcoming to his office. And even several months after his extended appointment of a calendar year, the HOD was left untouched, despite having a few other qualified staffers in the department who can be appointed as either statutory HODs or acting HODs.

Meanwhile, the Code of Conduct for Public Officers in Nigeria prohibits abuse of office, as outlined in the Code of Conduct and Tribunal Act, Cap. 15, and the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999. Public officers must act according to rules, regulations, and laws, and any action without due process is considered an abuse of power. According to the Act, examples of abuse of office include staff maltreatment, disregard for rules, flamboyant lifestyles, inefficiency, election rigging, destruction of government property, and corruption. Section 13 of the Code of Conduct and Tribunal Act Cap 15 and Paragraph 9 of the Fifth Schedule Part 1 to the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, specifically prohibit arbitrary action by public officials. The codes aim to promote accountability and transparency in public office; yet, adherence to the code of conduct has been critically low, as it was observed that most HODs are guilty of various arbitrary decisions, humiliations, nepotism, favoritism, corrupt practices, et al. without checks and balances in place to inhibit their dissimilar excesses and laxities. A participant also recounted how he

has been working under duress; as a result of various abusive roles of the departmental head, who can arbitrarily wake up one morning and give order that a course a lecturer has been taking since the beginning of a semester until mid-semester is hereby to be taken by him (HOD), this, among other abuses of office, has been preventing the participant from being productive as a faculty member. Another participant did a retrospect to confess that there was a time the head of his department intended to punish him, so he displaced him as the Examination Officer and sent him to the examination committee of the institution as a representative of the department with the thought that he would be badly used as a punishment from the HOD. But to everyone's surprise, the said participant got on the examination committee of the institution and became a household name in no time at all.

- **Faculty Members' Teaching and Research Activities**

The study found that faculty members who were taught and mentored by effective departmental leaders were more likely to engage in innovative and impactful research, and adopt student-centered teaching approaches. These faculty members were also more likely to collaborate with colleagues from other disciplines, and engage in community service and outreach activities. On the other hand, faculty members who were subjected to ineffective departmental leadership practices were more likely to experience burnout, demotivation, and lack of job satisfaction.

- **Students' Learning Outcomes**

The study found that students who were taught by faculty members who were mentored by effective departmental leaders achieved better academic outcomes, including higher grades and graduation rates. These students were also more likely to engage in critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity, and reported higher levels of satisfaction with their academic programs. On the other hand, students who were taught by faculty members who were subjected to ineffective departmental leadership practices reported lower levels of academic achievement and satisfaction, and were more likely to experience anxiety and stress in alignment with inferences in (Tinto, 1993).

The results of this study highlight the critical importance of effective departmental leadership in enhancing academic excellence in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Departmental leaders who demonstrate transformational leadership qualities, empower faculty members, and prioritize academic excellence are more likely to create an environment that supports innovation, creativity, and critical thinking. On the other hand, departmental leaders who abuse their power and privilege, engage in nepotism and favoritism, and prioritize personal interests over academic excellence, undermine the quality of education and erode faculty trust. The study's findings have implications for leadership development programs, faculty recruitment and retention, and student learning outcomes in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the complex interplay between departmental leadership practices and their impact on academic excellence in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Through a comprehensive examination of effective and ineffective leadership practices, faculty activities, and student outcomes, this discussion aims to delve deeper into the implications and broader context of these findings.

The study highlights the crucial role of transformational leadership qualities, such as vision, communication, and empowerment, in fostering a culture of academic excellence. These findings are consistent with prior research by (Idiko, & Obah, 2023; Jiang, et.al 2017; Carter, et.al 2013; García-Morales, et.al 2012), who emphasized the positive influence of transformational leadership on organizational performance. The observed mentorship program implemented by one departmental leader aligns with the literature on mentoring in academia, emphasizing its positive impact on professional development and job satisfaction (Fagenson-Eland, Marks, & Amendola, 1997).

Contrary to effective leadership practices, ineffective leadership characterized by power abuse, nepotism, and favoritism has detrimental effects on education quality and faculty morale.

This aligns with studies by Bilgiç, (2023) and Yeşilyurt, (2023), highlighting the negative consequences of leadership misconduct on organizational performance and employee well-being. The misuse of departmental resources and arbitrary decision-making processes reflect the challenges outlined in the Code of Conduct for Public Officers in Nigeria, emphasizing the need for ethical leadership in academic institutions (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999).

The study reveals pervasive unhealthy competition driven by success rate metrics, leading to undue pressure on departmental heads and unethical practices. This phenomenon echoes the inferences of Ma, (2023) on academic environments and student persistence, highlighting the negative impact of institutional pressures on student outcomes. The abuse of office, lack of inclusive operations, and arbitrary actions by departmental heads are reminiscent of studies on organizational misconduct and its repercussions (Lee, & Gailey, 2007; Aguilera, & Vadera, 2008).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the critical importance of effective departmental leadership in fostering academic excellence in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Transformational leadership qualities such as vision, communication, and empowerment were found to be instrumental in creating a conducive environment for innovation, collaboration, and student success. Conversely, ineffective leadership practices characterized by power abuse, nepotism, and favoritism have detrimental effects on education quality, faculty morale, and student outcomes.

This study underscores the urgent need for leadership development programs tailored to equip departmental leaders with transformational skills and ethical decision-making capabilities. This aligns with recommendations by Northouse (2018) on leadership development strategies for enhancing organizational effectiveness. Furthermore, academic institutions must prioritize transparency, accountability, and inclusive governance structures to mitigate the negative effects of toxic leadership practices (Eisenbeiss & Knippenberg, 2020).

Recommendations

- i. **Leadership Development Programs:** Academic institutions should prioritize leadership development programs tailored to equip departmental leaders with transformational skills, ethical decision-making capabilities, and inclusive leadership practices. These programs should focus on mentorship, communication, conflict resolution, and strategic planning. This further aligns with the position of Elkins, (2003) on transformational learning.
- ii. **Ethical Guidelines and Accountability:** Institutions must establish clear ethical guidelines and accountability mechanisms to curb power abuse, nepotism, and favoritism. Regular audits and transparent reporting systems should be implemented to ensure responsible use of resources and fair treatment of faculty and students. Just as Mendy, (2023) theorized the need for accountability obligations for ethical conducts of government bureaucrats in order accountability.
- iii. **Faculty Empowerment:** Empowerment of faculty members through mentorship, professional development opportunities, and recognition programs can enhance teaching and research quality. Collaborative initiatives and interdisciplinary approaches should be encouraged to foster a culture of continuous learning and innovation (Sumathi, *et.al* 2023; Leibowitz, *et.al* 2011).
- iv. **Student-Centered Approaches:** Academic programs should adopt student-centered teaching approaches that promote critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. Support services such as counseling, career guidance, and academic advising should be readily available to enhance student success and well-being. (Theodoridou, 2021).
- v. **Transparency and Communication:** Departmental leaders should prioritize transparent communication, inclusive decision-making processes, and regular

feedback mechanisms. Open dialogue between faculty, students, and administrators can facilitate trust, collaboration, and shared governance within academic institutions (Jaradat, 2013).

- vi. **Code of Conduct Enforcement:** Strict enforcement of ethical codes of conduct for public officers, including departmental heads, is essential to prevent abuse of office, corruption, and unethical practices. Legal frameworks and disciplinary measures should be in place to hold accountable those who engage in misconduct. (Zimmerman, 2016).
- vii. **Research and Best Practices:** Academic institutions should encourage research on leadership best practices, organizational ethics, and effective governance structures. Collaboration with external experts, industry partners, and international institutions can provide valuable insights and benchmarking opportunities (Baldo, 2016).

By implementing these recommendations, Nigerian tertiary institutions can enhance their capacity to cultivate a culture of academic excellence, ethical leadership, and continuous improvement for the benefit of faculty, students, and society at large.

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