

# BETWEEN INSECURITY AND HOPE

## Reflections on youth work with young refugees



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# **BETWEEN INSECURITY AND HOPE**

Reflections on youth work  
with young refugees

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## Chapter 7

# Recognition of the cultural capital of young refugees: the CAP (Centre for Lifelong Learning) as an academic experience of inclusion in Italy

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*Fausta Scardigno*

### Introduction

**Y**outh work is, for the European Union (European Commission 2010a: 11), a form of “out-of-school education managed by professional or voluntary youth workers that contributes to the development of young people”. Exchange between youth workers has been, since the Treaty establishing the European Union in 1992, one of the actions aimed at developing the European dimension of education policy. Over a period of two decades, European Community institutions have given priority to the professional development of youth workers, with particular attention to the validation of their skills and the development of “innovative services, pedagogies and practice” (European Commission 2009b: 11). Indeed, youth workers and their educational practices are called upon within all intervention areas of European youth policy. In particular, the European Commission recognises the role of youth work in youth policies aimed at employment, health, social inclusion and entrepreneurship, (European Commission 2009a).

The recognition of youth work as an educational agency, however, is still tied to the ability to demonstrate its working methods and the impact on the lives of young people (European Commission and Council of Europe 2004), and this demands evidence-based research. Nevertheless, the current formulation of European Union youth policy is not sufficient for a full understanding of what distinguishes youth work operators from other services with whom collaboration is required.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the youth work service with young refugees and migrant people launched in 2015 at the University of Bari. Called CAP (Centre for Lifelong Learning), the service promotes lifelong learning, including the recognition and validation of formal and non-formal learning that migrants acquired in their country of origin. The service is open to all EU and non-EU young students and its mission is the enhancement of “cultural capital” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1971; De Feo and Pitzalis 2015) as a fundamental and strategic asset for humanity.

Youth work with young refugees practised at the CAP service faces specific challenges at an operational level, especially in dealing with the absence of original documents of formal qualifications. Refugees who fear being persecuted cannot go to the authorities of their own country as well as to the consulate representatives abroad. It is the responsibility of the host country to take care of the refugee and to start all the procedures necessary to understand the judicial status, the educational and professional situation, and to gain comparability of these qualifications.

The policies for integration and inclusion based on the enhancement of cultural and professional capital of people, refugees and migrants are growing in importance (Ambrosini 2011, 2017; Timm 2016). More specifically, the acknowledgement of cultural differences as constitutive and emergent features of social reality greatly impact transitions in education and social mobility (Besozzi 2015; Santagati 2011).

The CAP service acts as a formal and institutional place for youth work that is able to evaluate the cultural capital of young refugees, and recognise their formal, informal and non-formal competences. The author is the President of CAP and Chancellor's referent to the relationship with foreign students. During the first project implemented in 2015 by the CAP, called *Fondata sul Lavoro*, a service of recognition of formal and non-formal learning was offered to young migrants and refugees. Furthermore, during this first project, a group of 20 refugees started to play an active role in CAP by helping other migrant people to apply for its services. They continued, therefore, to play a role of tutor during the second project called *Work for You* from 2016 up to now. In the meanwhile, a part of this group of young refugees became students of the University of Bari. Thanks to the services offered by CAP, therefore, they had the chance to have their educational qualifications recognised in order to be admitted into a university course.

This chapter first presents the CAP services and the main two consecutive projects, *Fondata sul Lavoro* and *Work for You*, where the group of young refugees started to be involved. It then focuses on the biographies of some of the young refugees actively involved in the CAP activities – both as beneficiaries and as a tutor for other migrants that needed recognition of their formal and non-formal learning in order to apply for a job and/or for a university course.

## **The CAP: an institutional response grounded in rights**

The CAP has an integrated methodology: in the first phase, it collects the life stories of young refugees and then, working with an interdisciplinary team, collaboratively works towards the recognition of professional competences and soft skills. The work of CAP also included the development of a proposal for a unitary university service for the recognition of equivalence of foreign academic qualifications. Indeed, a university degree legally recognised as equivalent to a similar Italian qualification helps to provide weight to a curriculum vitae, as well as recognising specific professional postgraduate skills and qualifications. At the University of Bari, there is no specific orientation service, nor a unified procedure for the recognition of the equivalence of foreign academic qualifications. Italian universities, due to their autonomous status, evaluate foreign academic qualifications through the application of Articles 2 and 3 of Law 148/02 (and, therefore, the Lisbon Convention) to grant analogous



Italian qualifications. Through this innovative approach the Centre attempts to give an institutional response to the demands for cultural acknowledgement as a formal and substantial mechanism for integration and inclusion within the tertiary academic paths of learning (McBrien, Dooley and Birman 2017).

In this way, the CAP has been oriented according to the principles of the Geneva Convention and the Lisbon Convention, which guarantee young refugees the right to recognise their titles and competences even in the absence of original and legally translated documents. In particular, Article VII of the Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in higher education in the European region stipulates that:

every party within the framework of their education system and in accordance with their constitutional, legal and regulatory provisions, will take all possible and reasonable steps to develop procedures to evaluate equitably and effectively whether refugees, and persons in similar conditions to refugees meet the requirements for access to higher education or work, even in cases in which the qualifications awarded by one of the parties cannot be substantiated by the relevant documents.

Moreover, Article 22 of the Geneva Convention provides that:

Contracting States shall grant refugees, as far as primary school is concerned, the same treatment accorded to their nationals. With regard to teaching in schools that are not primary schools, notably on admission to studies, the recognition of study certificates, diplomas and university degrees issued abroad, the exemption of tuition fees, awarding grants, the Contracting states grant refugees the most favourable treatment possible and in any case a treatment no less favourable than that granted in the same circumstances to foreigners in general.

Through social research applied to the analysis and intervention in the field of social policies for young refugees, the CAP seeks to work towards the recognition and certification of soft skills; the recognition of prior learning “on the job” and their translation into professional qualifications and/or *Credito Formativo Universitario* (CFU) (University Credits) expendable in university courses; the promotion of equivalence or recognition of training credits for EU and non-EU citizens. It offers financial support for refugee students and operates through networking with institutional and university representatives working on these issues.

## **From theory to international practices: the programmes *Fondata sul Lavoro* and *Work for You***

The Italian education and vocational system is currently undergoing a remarkable process of reform. Based on some of the most recent agreements between the government and the social partners (1993; 1996; 2001; 2002-05), the outline of a more comprehensive and national Italian system can be detected. This is particularly clear in the law on “promotion of employment” (Treu Law 1996-97), in which the basic principles of a (vocational) lifelong learning system are described. The 1996-97 law introduces the principle that competences can be certified irrespective of the way they were acquired. Competences acquired through work should be assessed and potentially recognised in the same way as competences acquired through formal

training institutions. For this reason, the Italian Ministry of Employment in 2003 made a further step ahead with the promulgation of the “citizen training portfolio”, a personal portfolio where all formal and informal experiences and competences acquired in the lifelong learning process, throughout internships too, are registered and certified by regional institutions, as also advocated by the European Union. To date, this certification tool has been tested in 13 Italian regions and is still developing in many others.

In 2006, the Italian Ministry of Employment also promoted a national meeting to discuss professional standards of certification in order to define a common national qualification framework. Since 2010, many regions have adopted these standards and others are still working in this direction. Most recently, in 2012, the reformation of the Italian labour market (Legge Fornero) generated further discussion on lifelong learning education and certification, providing important contributions towards developing a coherent model of validation. Italian efforts to develop a certification model and a concrete procedure can be summarised in this way: a modular system of training, a system of training credits, and tailored assessment and certification procedures.

The aim is to integrate and interconnect the various systems (initial vocational education and training, and continuing vocational training) and achieve “a personalisation” of learning routes. Tools developed to achieve such aims include an “individual training record book” (which can be combined with formal certificates to form a portfolio), and a “skills audit”, not based on one centralised model applied throughout the entire country, but according to various regions. At an early stage of implementation, certain tensions have already occurred. If a “personalisation of learning routes” has to be successful, procedures and methodologies for assessment and recognition of competences are of crucial importance. The questions: who is going to measure it? Which methodologies are necessary? are at the core of current reforms, while various stakeholder groups (school, employers, employees) cautiously observe initiatives and progress.

Undoubtedly, many key issues remain to be solved: first, there is a predominance of academic content and curriculums in the proposed assessment procedures; this raises issues in the treatment of non-formal learning elements (for example, from the workplace) in a fair and valid way. As long as assessments are exclusively based on reference points defined within a formal system, learning experiences following a different logic and leading to different content (for example, based on work experience) can easily be overlooked or not taken into account.

A further weakness is represented by the lack of clear-cut definitions/regulations of the tools in question, and moreover, the lack of a system of national standards to promote consistent and comparable practices. While being the most significant obstacle to reliable and valid assessments, the lack of a national standard is not the only obstacle to be dealt with.

An ultimate, yet highly significant, obstacle is the difficulty in involving Italian entrepreneurs in the discussion on the relevance of formal and informal learning certification. Therefore, although recognised as a priority, Italian managers often doubt the practices and methodologies, as well as those involved in awarding

certification, believing that allowing competences to be measured in such a way can lead to their mismanagement and misuse. Therefore, a common framework balancing the interests of the individual and the enterprise is still necessary in Italy.

Finally, the Italian situation is contradictory. On the one hand, there is a clear development in the direction of a competence-based system for education and training, where various learning pathways, both internally and externally, to formal training institutions can lead to formal qualifications. On the other hand, there are still several practical/economic obstacles, as well as those of a more general nature. The lack of a national standard reference clearly belongs to the second category and future developments must in some way provide an answer to this challenge.

Moving from the premises above, within the two programmes *Fondato sul Lavoro* and *Work for You*, funded by the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals 2007-2013 and carried out in 2012 and 2014, the CAP developed new services for the validation of informal learning and recognition of qualifications acquired by immigrants in their country of origin. While the first one was a pilot programme, the second one has been extended to 229 refugee and migrant people.

The activities of the CAP resulted in a free support service for preparatory work on the recognition of qualifications and/or credits already acquired by non-EU citizens in their country of origin, as well as a service for the transparency of learning acquired in informal and non-formal settings within previous work experience. More specifically, the services provided by the CAP intended to guarantee:

1. Information and guidance on the recognition of previously acquired qualifications for the purpose of study and/or work;
2. The evaluation (self/hetero-evaluation) of soft skills acquired in informal and non-formal settings useful for inclusion in the labour market;
3. The development of transparency of professional learning informally acquired on the job and their translation into CFUs, possibly redeemable in university courses.

In operational terms, the CAP developed a consultancy procedure divided into three phases, generally relating to three meetings with the user.

## **Phase 1 – Pre-diagnostics**

The first phase involved initial contact and welcome. During this time, the operator carried out a preliminary screening of user motivations in order to direct them towards a specific functional consultancy service. Through a registration card developed ad hoc, having identified the specific needs expressed by the user, the operator began consultancy with the signing of a consultancy agreement. During this phase, information was gathered to produce an initial profile of the life experience and professional training of the candidate.

## **Phase 2 – Diagnostics**

Following the initial screening, the user had the opportunity to take advantage of a process of analysis of soft skills acquired through previous informal learning and/or professional experiences, useful in the process of an active job search. Through a

leaderless group discussion – a group discussion technique without a leader that is widely used in the context of assessment and training – a group of six to eight users was created in order to discuss a case, also created ad hoc, which required decision making within an hour. The discussion of a case was obviously a pretext to observe group dynamics and the emergence of “spontaneous” areas of expertise, as described above. The output of these two evaluation phases was the result of the weighted average of scores which allowed for developing the skills profile of the user.

### **Phase 3 – Final phase**

A feedback meeting was held in the final phase in order to provide results of the pathway to the user, summarised in a skills folder, which is a final summary dossier on strengths/weaknesses, useful to support the user in the definition of a life plan for education and/or professional training, its phases and operational strategies.

During the second programme, the CAP advisory path was concluded in 2017 for 229 young migrants and refugees. Among them, 66 were women and 166 men, aged between 16 and 35. The cultural capital of those people is medium-high: they often have a degree and a masters, though largely misrecognised by the Italian learning system. Among the 229 young migrants, only 33 attended elementary school, 39 middle school and 98 high school, 57 have a degree and two a PhD. They mostly come from Pakistan, Georgia, Albania, Nigeria and Bangladesh. Another goal of the service has been the possibility for 102 people to start a certification process of soft skills (for example, communication, team work, decision making, etc.) acquired through prior learning and working experience even in informal settings. They have actively participated in self- and group-assessment sessions, taking to the definition of a professional profile that for most of them has been useful in their job search.

### **Life stories of a group of refugees and migrant people involved in the CAP**

On the basis of these legal principles which clearly recall the broadest theme of the “right to study” guaranteed by individual universities, in 2016 the University Service of Permanent Learning of the University of Bari (CAP) launched a path of transparency and validation of the qualifications of students, professional skills and soft skills of 20 young refugees (all beneficiaries of protection). These were refugees who had enrolled on a course but were unable to provide the full documentation normally required for the recognition of the foreign title (primarily legal translation of the title).

Today (February 2018), in addition to the nine refugee students enrolled in 2016, 11 university students have started their university academic training with the help of the CAP service. The majority of these young people crossed the Mediterranean Sea and applied for asylum in Italy. All 20 young people were eligible for a scholarship from the Ministry of Interior and CRUI (Italian Chancellor’s Conference) which exempts these young people from paying taxes and allows them to have their residence and accommodation at one of the university colleges, as well as the use of the canteen, libraries and university sport services.

The pioneering work of Italian universities has been recognised by the International Organization for Migration (OIM) and the EUA (Welcome Map Refugees), as it has provided “finalised recognition” foreseen by the labour market reform, as well as enhancing the professional skills and soft skills of young refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.

Every day, as academics, we listen to the stories of migrants and refugees that come to our university. Through the life stories that we compile, we try to give the Permanent Education Services advisers a formal (and substantial) response which produces a document/certificate of equivalence or academic comparability. This is done in the form of a postgraduate transfer document that is submitted to the university's governing bodies. The document highlights the professional skills and individual soft skills necessary to obtain a qualification recognised by the regional professions register and responding to European and international guidelines.

At the methodological level, since the start-up phase, the service has used the tools of ethnographic research, especially during the initial reception phase, with particular reference to the reconstruction of the life story to gather, through a dialogic and empathic mode, useful information to reconstruct the feelings and experiences that characterise the difficult transition experienced by young refugees.

The thematic areas investigated in the life stories were: the migratory experience, the current situation, integration conditions that can facilitate the processes of economic, cultural and social integration, and expectations for the future. In order to develop trust, each interview was conducted individually, and lasted an average of one hour. The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and subsequently shuffled and subjected to content analysis. The group of 20 refugees involved in the CAP service consists of young adults (aged between 18 and 25 years old) distributed almost equally along the gender variable. Interview transcriptions allowed for the organisation of content that emerged from the salient topics investigated in the interview.

Nine of the refugees had migrated in order to flee the crisis in their country, and to improve their cultural, economic and working conditions. Two participants cited family and personal reasons for leaving. Nine participants expressed their desire to stay in Italy, while two hoped to return home in the future, when the situation improves. Those who wish to stay described language and regular employment as barriers.

The following excerpts of interviews capture how the expatriate project has been painful for everyone, not only in terms of fractures in their personal life path, but also in relation to the hospitality and community life.

I. is 19 years old and from Cameroon. He has been living in Italy since 2011. He is not employed, despite following a four-month course upon arrival in Italy. He maintains school engagements but finds difficulty in creating relationships and friendships, mainly due to religious differences. He played football for a while, and then had to leave due to ankle problems, but his intention is to resume. He receives economic support from his father in order to bear the costs of his stay here:

I'm in Italy for family reasons, I went to find my brother in Libya, then the war started and I came to Italy. Especially for my mother, she did not understand and did not accept

how I grew up. We have had different parents my brother and I, I came home from my natural parents when I came back things had changed and I did not feel better, so with my dad we decided to let me go. With the ship, in Tripoli, then in Lampedusa I was taken to Bari. When Libya started war, both my brother and I thought it was too late. Then no one could go out, the frontiers were closed and then thanks to my father who helped me I managed to come to Italy. I did not come alone, but I did not know anyone. In Italy, I did a course lasting four months. After all, they told me to wait little for me, but meanwhile I continued attending school and did not know if they changed their minds. But they knew that I was able to do the job for which they prepared me and I proved to be able to work together. Now I study all the time, I wanted to study and I wondered what to do, I would also like to come to university. By committing myself to this, I was able to show how much I was, what I was doing and what I wanted to do. It's not that I have many friends, I know different people, but it is difficult to see people who have my own religion. I live with other people: an Italian and an Afghanistan.

The analysis of narrative data collected during this field of research has proved to be particularly valuable in reconstructing the conditions under which the expatriate projects of young refugees and migrants in Italy experience this difficult transitory experience. Regardless of the intrinsic or extrinsic motivation that led to the choice to rethink their life project in a different cultural context, the stories have highlighted the challenges experienced by young refugees at personal, family and professional levels:

Since I was little I liked Italy, it was a normal and quiet country, even when my father who was in Libya told me about Italy, and all of Italy spoke in Libya. I came here with other compatriots but there was no hook from my country, there are many drug trafficks and they started to use me, then to stay away from them I went to Florence where they tried to seriously understand how they could hit me, for example with smoke, but I still do not smoke. There was a Red Cross lord who helped me, my compatriots left me alone. (R., 22 years old, Pakistan)

An emerging theme in all the stories collected is the difficulty associated not only with the need to re-read his or her transnational youth identity in the experience of passage and expulsion following the expatriation, but also of the need to adapt to a new context made up of norms, values, stereotypes and prejudices associated with the image of the refugee that remains widespread in Italian society. This tension between the desire to "achieve a dream", both at a personal and professional level, and the desire to relate to distant affections and ties that ensure continuity and cohesion with their own identity, characterises all the stories. In this context, education, employment and professional experiences are not only a means of subsistence but a concrete opportunity to legitimise their own social and personal identity, a way of being socially visible, to be accepted as members of the community, legitimately engaged in their own development and growth.

The voices of the participants in this exploratory research, which obviously does not claim exhaustiveness but attempts to open a small gap and read the inner world of these subjects, confirm the urgency of enhancing the human capital of young refugees. Recognising the training and professional experiences, cultural and academic titles of the young respondents has shown the richness of the cultural heritage possessed by these subjects, a precious treasure potentially available to enhance the communities in which they are living. Moving from this evidence, and the awareness

that the future of our society will depend to a great extent on the ability to value all citizens, the project and the subsequent establishment of the Centre for Permanent Learning at the university in 2016 were born.

The theoretical framework pushing towards the enhancement of cultural, human and social capital of migrants and young refugees is based on the acknowledgement of cultural differences as constitutive features of social reality. Educational choice may provide opportunities for social mobility, while also producing divides within ethnic minorities and across generations. This is one of the main mechanisms of discontinuity between generations in the processes of educational choice that might influence access to opportunities for social mobility. Recent studies have underlined how the structural variable of ascribed cultural capital impacts life chances more than socio-economic status, even if at the same time it is not a protection factor that might assure a definite continuity. If this double transition of both ethnic belonging and neglected cultural capital is not taken into account by social inclusion policies, a perverse and foreseeable effect of feedback inequality risks being reproduced (McBrien, Dooley and Birman 2017), even in front of choices of hospitality that are necessary, useful but not sufficient for the development of the whole Mediterranean Europe and for many other countries.

Working towards the enhancement and enrichment of the cultural capital of refugees represents a turning point for inclusion policies, an alert to an unforeseen effect of inequality (Peterson et al. 2017) which could be inbuilt into some processes that even if addressed to give hospitality do not actually acknowledge the human capital and the economic and cultural benefits implied in the enhancement of integration.

## **Conclusions and future directions of working for young refugees**

The programmes carried out by the CAP contribute to the implementation of a service for the recognition and certification of prior learning in formal, informal and non-formal settings, which is also extended to a larger population, not only of migrants and refugees but also youth in general.

In particular, in relation to the service offered by the CAP helpdesk of assistance in the gathering of information and the initiation of procedures for recognition of learning acquired in formal settings, the experience of CAP has led to a handbook on the legal recognition of academic qualifications for citizens from outside the EU. This provides a summary of the procedures to be followed in the event that the user is resident abroad and about to commence residence in Italy, or is already resident in Italy with a regular residence permit and seeking recognition for qualifications formally acquired in the country of origin in order to continue with their studies in Italy. The second significant output of the CAP relates to the setting up of a unitary university lifelong learning service, which is useful in supporting not only the immigrant people but also a wider range of users, in the recognition of prior learning in non-formal and informal settings. The transparency of non-formal and informal skills, through both self- and hetero-evaluation tests, can help to find employment. The CAP helps young people to learn or improve skills of active job searching with a greater awareness of their own resources but, above all, the enhancement of knowledge acquired on the job that can then result in the recognition of university

credits, potentially redeemable on training at the University of Bari. The possibility of establishing a unitary university service for the development of a lifelong learning culture, which will result in the enhancement of a more articulate definition of skills, as not only practical experience or theoretical knowledge, but how the two components may be integrated, is certainly an indicator of modernisation at the university.

This clearly connects one of the most significant outputs of the project and of the CAP service: the definition of a memorandum of understanding between departments including the Department of Youth and Social Citizenship (Immigration Office) and the Department of Training and Education – Schools, Universities, Vocational Training (the Vocational Training Service of the Puglia Region) in the dissemination, development, promotion and co-ordination of services for the certification of learning developed in non-formal and informal settings, acquired by refugees in their countries of origin. This protocol aims to gather the considerations previously outlined and lay the foundations for fruitful collaboration and co-ordination with regard to certification and, above all, with reference to the work of establishing a Regional System of Competencies (Law DGR no. 2273 of 13 November 2012) and the definition of a Regional Repertoire of Professional Figures (Law DGR no. 1277 of 2 December 2013). This step is undoubtedly a crucial step in the pathway proposed by the CAP in terms of developing the transparency of skills acquired on the job, difficult to certify in terms of formal qualifications acquired, but valuable for the recognition of professional qualifications. The implications of this evidence can be seen both in relation to the actions of active job searching but also in relation to the previously discussed possibility of the translation of specific skills into university training credits, which the regional repertoire could then help in terms of placement in very specific sectors.

Based on this model, the CAP centre operates, therefore, both as incubators of youth skills and as vehicles for their potential for social change, especially for young refugees. This perspective has led the present work to conceiving of youth work as an agent of social equality, basing its work on the interaction between youth and adult youth workers (Morciano and Scardigno 2014). Youth work in services for lifelong learning, therefore, can be designed and developed as places in which young people and adults together seek to identify the mechanisms of social inequality in their life contexts (Coussée 2008; Morciano 2015), and to build networks of participatory action that aim to contain or inhibit them.

In this sense, the CAP is increasingly characterised as a youth work service that somehow “uses” the opportunity to work with the target of refugees, a challenger target for legislation and accreditation systems and certification of qualifications, or formal educational credentials that cannot be highlighted in many cases precisely because of the protection status enjoyed by such students. These aspects are particularly relevant to sociology of education and to the international debate on the issue of the loss of the economic value of the degree, the so-called credentialing theme and the progressive loss of value of formal titles that have become excessive in relation to demand and hence subject to a write-down, like any other economic asset.

Young refugees who come to our service present an amazing opportunity to consider our work in the field and to rethink the tools that often should not simply



answer to external and internal validity criteria, but more than this, should give useful and usable solutions of youth work practices addressed to young refugees. This is a micro perspective of analysis on the process of integration that actually enhances concrete and contextual practices and experimentations, able to act on positive mechanisms that might push away new forms of populism and racism, as expression of a diffused sense of communitarian disorientation and fear (Zanfrini 2015). Experience of academic integration of young refugees at our university could be considered as a contextual (micro) experience of youth work, particularly considered by some organisations (macro) such as the International Organization for Migration for instance in the programme “skills2work” or by the European Network of Universities (EUA) through the project HERE, as good practices of inclusion of some challenging categories of targets, such as young refugees. From our point of view, what should be further investigated in European policies and programmes in the processes of enhancement of cultural capital is that independently from the fact that they address young refugees, the multiplication of the value of trust is the real agent of the success of this experience of local integration and inclusion. It is an exchange value, a “relational good” (Donati and Solci 2011) that although free is so difficult to find in programmes and policies of integration all over Europe.

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