

# University Education in KSA in COVID Times: Status, Challenges and Prospects

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As Coronavirus cases in the KSA grew, more and more economic sectors took an ongoing view of curbing the spread of the pandemic and isolating those already infected. The study generally assessed the Saudi-based university education in the times of COVID through the prism of Saudi Electronic University and Qassim University. It employed a quantitative and qualitative research design. Results revealed that the teachers and students of both universities assessed the status of online learning modality very favourably during the pandemic. The overall rating on the level of skill of teachers and students using online learning modality is also very favourable. This indicates that both students and teachers are capable of using and engaging themselves in the online learning mode. The assessment on the attitude and beliefs of the students and teachers on the online learning implementation, generally, both students and teachers assessed themselves to have a favourable attitude and beliefs. This shows that Saudi universities have already positively embraced the use of online learning well before the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students cannot apply the learning they gained to actual experience; online learning is somewhat boring, and technical difficulties emerged on the conduct of online learning for both universities. Suggestions were presented by the respondents to provide solutions to the identified problems on the status of online learning in the KSA.

**Keywords:** *Higher education, Online learning, COVID-19, University education.*



## **Introduction**

The emblem of social integration, the engine of economic development, and the proponent of democracy never meant higher education. We need continual creativity to achieve higher education as a significant equaliser that can drive us to more dedication, sustainability, and equity. Its breakthrough would create an ecosystem, which offers unique student requirements a broad range of qualifications and high-quality education opportunities. Higher education institutions have invested resources in the use of ICT to promote education in developing countries. The move from the traditional method of learning to the use of technology-mediated methods is called eLearning. Unquestionably, eLearning cannot be seen as an alternative to formal learning, but as a way to promote and extend the scope, and to diversify the activities, of education. The novel Coronavirus Disease 19 (COVID-19) has impacted the world's education infrastructure with the epidemic of ravaging the globe, which has posed incentives and threats to higher education institutions (Kraemer et al., 2020; Sintema, 2020). Even though higher education organisations around the country and across the globe will proactively adapt to the pandemic disruption, COVID-19 resulted in the nation's school closing. As a consequence, education has undergone drastic changes which lead to online learning, primarily on interactive platforms.

## **Importance and Justifications of the Study**

To most Saudi students, however, this is a new education system, as online teaching is more an anomaly than a rule in the region and the learning outcomes associated with this method merit a long-term detailed review. The current study, nevertheless, targets a more immediate and tangible field of inquiry; that is, the state of tech-readiness of two Saudi universities for implementation of sustainable, quality education via the virtual medium. In addition, the study evaluates the perceptions and attitudes of a convenient sample of students and teachers at both Saudi Electronic University and Qassim University, working with a cross-section of participants. By assessing the state of the infrastructural, skill, and attitudinal readiness of teachers and students to switch to online learning actively, the study is hopeful of presenting useful data to educational planners, funding agencies, academia, and learner base, and thereby to fill the gaps where they exist and step up the quality of already existing factors.

By evaluating the condition of teachers' facilities, expertise, and willingness to transition effectively to online learning, the study is hopeful of providing valuable knowledge to instructional administrators, financing authorities, academics and learners to fill the holes that remain, and enhance the efficiency of established variables. In the context of university level, this study will provide the following practical significance: (1) results will serve as input for the universities to develop IT infrastructure long-term development plan; (2) it will also strengthen the process of knowledge management of the universities to deal with the

challenging times; and finally, hopes to provide (3) input for teachers' development plan to deal with the technological divide.

The topic of the COVID-19 pandemic is of paramount interest to policy, policymakers, educators, and the general public, as it impacts their lives in the context of lockdowns and the possibility of contamination with the virus. The education sector is tremendously affected by the disease, as it will avoid operating regularly and continue to provide education electronically. In this concern, the teachers are made to face issue in delivering training to the students. This research would have the following functional significance in the sense of the university stage. The findings will act as a guide for universities to establish a long-term planning strategy for the infrastructure. This would also improve the information management mechanism in universities in order to tackle the problems that will eventually lead to the teacher growth strategy for addressing the technical divide. Besides, the current study has various inferences in both practical and theoretical aspects. In practical aspects, it provides strategies as to follow in times of crisis to overcome the issue, and the policymakers and the administration of the school will be able to perform necessary preparation that prevents them in such times. From a theoretical perspective, this study will provide directions to future researchers in crisis management to conduct extensive research on a related topic.

### **Project Objectives**

As early as 2007, Sandman cited medical historians' findings that pandemics, by all estimates across the world, are here to stay. Ross, Crowe, and Tyndall (2015) declared speaking of the Ebola pandemic that, humanity only had a small window of opportunity to act in preparation for the next pandemic. Felman (2020) traces the history of epidemics in the current and past millennium, from the Plague of Justinian (541- 542 CE) to COVID-19 (2020), remarkably establishing the fact that pandemics have struck humanity rather periodically. With this corpus of information, it is but logical for educational institutions to gear up both technologically and skill-wise for learning to take place smoothly in the prospect of more such attacks on humanity. In other words, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the status of online learning classes of Saudi Electronic University and Qassim University, especially in terms of:
  - 1.1.Efficiency
  - 1.2.Effectiveness
  - 1.3.Functionality
  - 1.4.Maintainability
2. What is the level of skill of teachers and students for online education?
3. What are the attitudes and beliefs of the teachers and students as far as online learning goes?

4. What problems do the students and teachers experience in the conduct of online learning?
5. What suggestions are to be offered by the students and teachers to improve the delivery of online learning modality for Saudi Electronic University and Qassim University?

## **Literature Review**

Saavedra (2020) estimates that COVID-19 is causing about 1.6 billion children and young people to stay away from educational institutions in over 161 countries. In other words, more than 80% of the students the world over are forced to stay at home. Further, online learning facilities can only reach affluent families, and many students are likely to be left out of the learning loop. For Lancet (2020), students confined to homes have to struggle on several counts. One, of course, the academic loss and two, they have to invest in managing their physical health. Dangerous habits such as enhanced screen time, eating to cut stress, and other challenges to mental wellbeing also stand. Finally, the most significant risk is that some students may never come back to the institution at all. Martinez (2020) claims that COVID-19 pandemic has given the opportunity to educational systems to find ways to sustain in future. It is an opportunity to test the ability to manage education at special times. As noted by Jaques (2010), every institute should prepare a crisis management plan to deal with the issues in the time of crisis. There are several elements of a crisis management plan that should be considered while making it to implement it successfully in the educational institutes. The aspects of the crisis management plan are crisis management committee that includes members from senior management, centralised approach for communication, and competent spokesperson that perform the task and implement strategies of crisis management.

Work in the associated literature shows the need for countries to be equipped for schooling in the case of a pandemic. Moreover, though children somehow consider themselves safe from severe, or lethal, diseases, they may become vectors of transmission, which was the principal explanation for closing schools worldwide (Chinazzi et al, 2020; Mulenga, &Marbán, 2020). Szabo et al. (2020) have given approach which concludes that "in cases where there are no appropriate safeguards or safeguards, a very rapid shift in the negative direction will occur in the course of the pandemic." Thus social isolation needs to be implemented.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

The research was quantitative and qualitative. As it is planned to be conducted across two universities, a convenience sample of teachers and students from the researcher's universe were selected to answer a detailed questionnaire on the level of technology, materials, and skills of teachers and learners to adopt online education. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis to gather qualitative data on beliefs about online learning. Finally, the researcher

will compare the data collected from the two universities before generalisations are drawn. The quantitative component of the study employed a descriptive-evaluative research design, which is deemed suitable for the study because it assessed the extent to which online learning modality is efficient, effective, functional, and maintainable in the context of two select universities. For the qualitative part, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was employed to selected teachers and students to ascertain the challenges and prospects for improvement.

## Results and Discussion

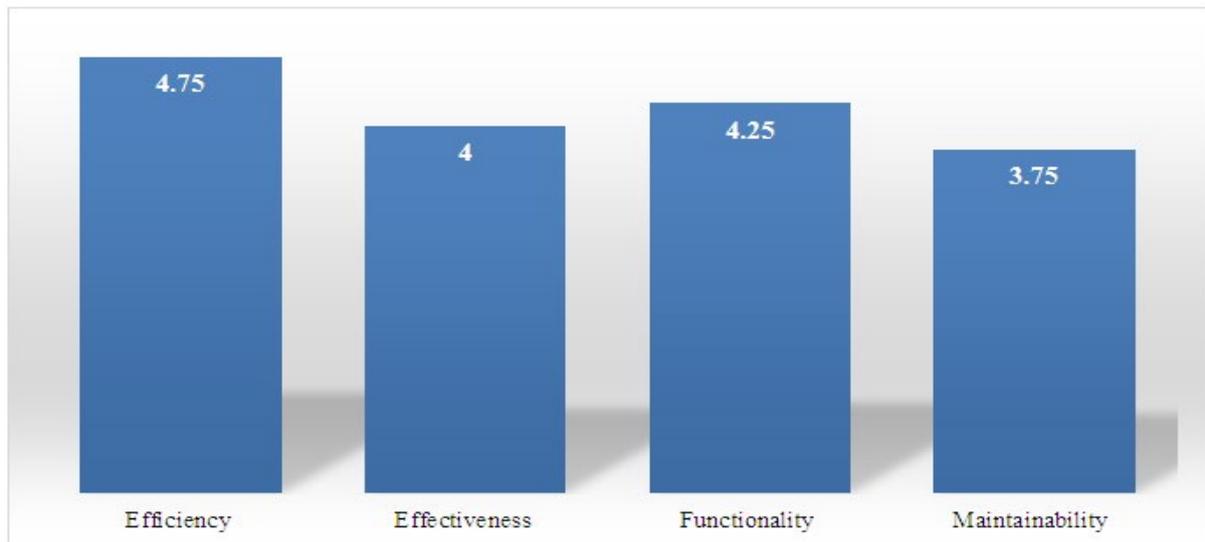
### *Research Question 1. What is the Status of Online Learning Classes of Saudi Electronic University and Qassim University?*

**Table 1:** Assessment of the Status of Online Learning Classes

Criteria	Overall Rating of Both Universities	Descriptive Interpretation
Efficiency	4.75	Excellent
Effectiveness	4.00	Very Good
Functionality	4.25	Very Good
Maintainability	3.75	Very Good
<b>Weighted Mean</b>	<b>4.187</b>	<b>Very Good</b>

**Legend:** 4.51-5.00 Excellent (E); 3.51-4.50 Very Good (VG); 2.51-3.50- Good (G); 1.51-2.50- Poor (P); 1.00-1.50; Very Poor (VP)

**Figure 1.** Assessment of the Status of Online Learning Classes



As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, both teachers and students assessed the status of online learning classes with the overall weighted mean of 4.187, which means “very good”. The finding generally implies that for both Saudi Electronic University and Qassim University, the implementation of online learning modality during the COVID-19 pandemic met its

purpose to continue the delivery of education to Saudi college students. A closer look at the table indicates that the efficiency of delivery has been rated excellent, and as to its effectiveness, functionality, and maintainability were assessed “very good”. The rise of online learning modality has been seen as the most effective mode of learning for students to protect them from COVID-19 pandemic (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020; Van et al., 2020).

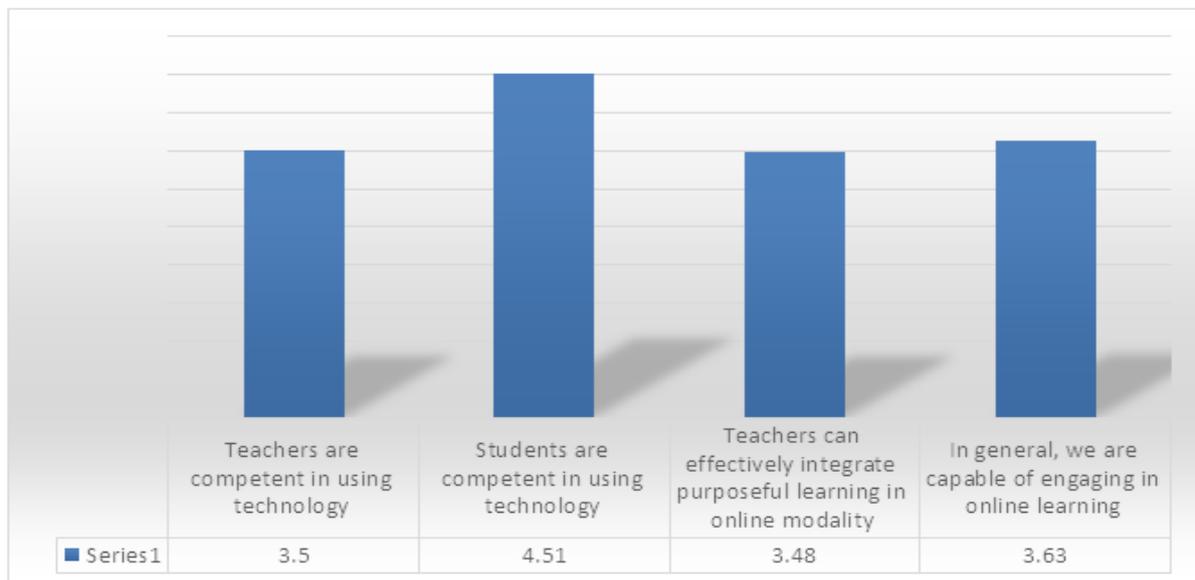
***Research Question 2. What is the Level of Skill of Teachers and Students for Online Education?***

**Table 2:** Assessment of the level of skill of teachers and students in online learning

<b>Attitudinal Items</b>	<b>Overall Rating of Both Universities</b>	<b>Descriptive Interpretation</b>
Teachers are competent in using technology	3.5	Good
Students are competent in using technology	4.51	Excellent
Teachers can effectively integrate purposeful learning in the online modality	3.48	Good
In general, we are capable of engaging in online learning	3.63	Very good
<b>Weighted Mean</b>	<b>3.78</b>	<b>Very Good</b>

**Legend:** 4.51-5.00Excellent (E); 3.51-4.50 Very Good (VG); 2.51-3.50- Good (G); 1.51-2.50- Poor (P); 1.00-1.50; Very Poor (VP)

**Figure 2.** Assessment on the level of skill of teachers and students in online learning



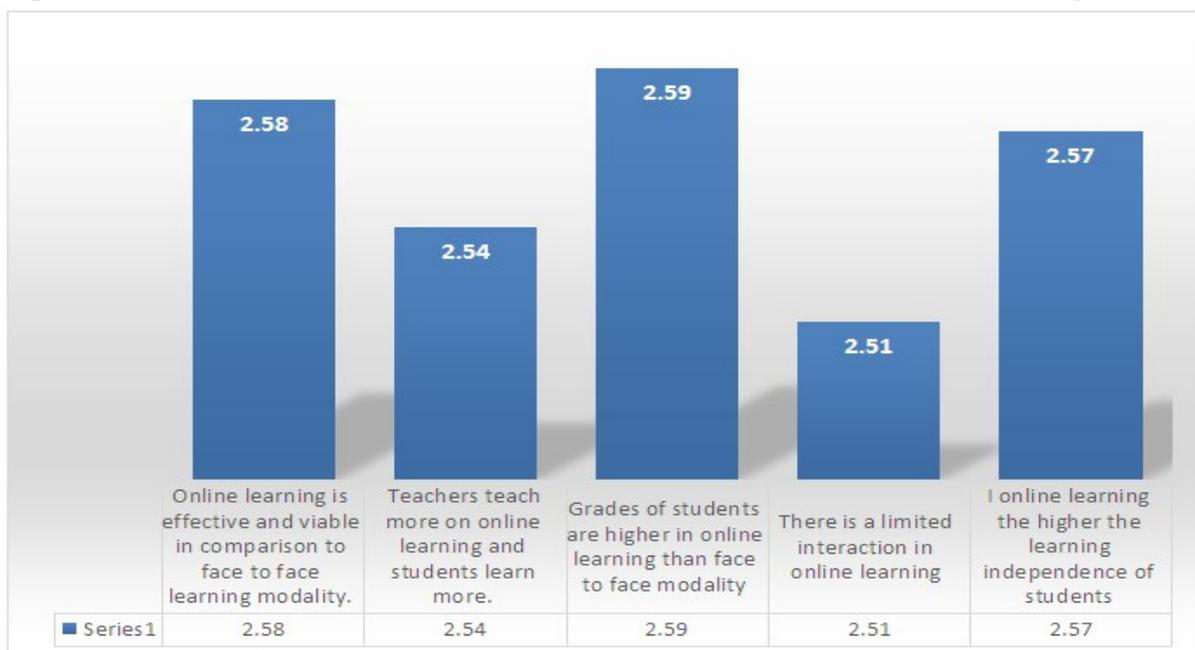
The results in Table 2, and Figure 2 show that the overall rating on the level of skill of teachers and students using online learning modality is very good. This indicates that both students and teachers are capable of handling and engaging themselves. Moreover, the students see themselves very good and excellent in using technology while teachers found themselves good in using technology. It can be inferred from the finding that students show a higher level of skill on the use of technology compared to the teachers. The faculty's ambivalent attitude may be attributable to the fact that while the faculty appears to have concerns about online schooling and literacy, it may not only depersonalise schooling and the proliferation of academic dishonesty, it is less flexible than acceptable in today's conventional education, except for a leading professorship. In the region, virtual and remote education universities have a fairly common problem of employee ignorance and disdain of technology adoption (ARDIÇ & Çiftçi, 2019; Fathema & Akanda, 2020; Trynus et al., 2019; Al-Ahdal, 2020).

**Research Question 3. What are the Attitudes and Beliefs of Teachers and Students as Far as Online Learning Goes?**

**Table 3:** Assessment of the attitudes and beliefs of the teachers and students as far as online learning goes

Attitudinal Items	Overall Rating of Both Universities	Descriptive Interpretation
Online learning is effective and viable in comparison to face to face learning modality.	2.58	Good
Teachers teach more on online learning and students learn more.	2.54	Good
Grades of students are higher in online learning than face to face modality	2.59	Good
There is a limited interaction in online learning	2.51	Good
I online learning the higher the learning independence of students	2.57	Good
<b>Weighted Mean</b>	<b>2.558</b>	<b>Good</b>

**Figure 3.** Assessment of the level of skill of teachers and students in online learning



Result in Table 3 and Figure 3 shows the assessment of the attitude and beliefs of the students and teachers in the online learning implementation. Generally, both students and teachers assessed themselves to have a favourable attitude and beliefs with the grand mean of 2.558. This shows that Saudi universities have already embraced the use of online learning even before the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, the readiness of the universities to use online learning may be ascribed to their favourable attitudes and beliefs. Almaliki and

Gruba (2020) assessed the ICT-Based methods and programs of Saudi universities and found that instructors are capable of using technology in the classroom. The faculty may voice concern about the results of the online class and the need for technical guidance. Prior work has also found that the instructor has a detrimental impact on the usage of technology by an electronic learning authority and that most instructors have an adverse spell of influence on online learning (Almarashdeh, 2016; Malmir & Bagheri, 2019; Murugaiah & Hwa, 2018).

#### ***Research Question 4. What Problems do the Students and Teachers Experience in the Conduct of Online Learning?***

Based on the interviews conducted as part of the qualitative analysis of the present study, the following problems emerged on the conduct of online learning for both universities: students cannot apply the learning they gained to actual experience, online learning is somewhat boring, and technical difficulties.

#### ***Students Cannot Apply the Learning to the Actual Experiences***

From the FGD with the professors, they simply noted that e-learning does not let the students put into practice the workable skill and knowledge they gained. One professor commented that *"Science has shown that practical experience (the famous concept of learning) is the best way to learn something. We will internalise and remember the information and knowledge that we acquire only after we perform the things we perform and meet (expert training)."*

#### ***Online Learning is Somewhat Boring***

Another problem they encountered is that online learning is seen as boring since it is devoid, or personal contact and interaction. As one student stressed, *"e-learning courses make us feel like just only reading"*. Another also noted, *"We feel get bored since the engagement is not there."* These kinds of courses mean that students often get bored with online training, which is one of the main reasons why e-learning courses fail. Students clearly may not want to take the class, do not enter the website, and do not complete the course. Similar findings have been reported that this has been one of the reasons why students failed (Singh & Thurman, 2019; Wu et al., 2017).

#### ***Technical Difficulties***

Another problem that arose during the interview concerns the presence of technical difficulties. One professor stated that *"technicalities are major problems particularly on the computer, internet system, and phones."* Another seconded that *"especially when the online session is ongoing then suddenly technicalities occur then we are being disrupted."*

Technicalities during online learning have been considered unavoidable if one does not plan properly (Belli, 2018; DiGregorio & Liston, 2018)

***Research Question 5. What Suggestions are to be Offered by Students and Teachers to Improve the Delivery of Online Learning Modality for both Saudi Electronic University and Qassim University***

From the transcript of the interviews, the following are the suggestions that are offered by teachers and students as to improve the delivery of online learning. First and foremost, the respondents provided suggestions on the problem that students cannot apply the learning to the actual experiences. One opined that *“there is a need for teachers to provide effective alternative simulators, particularly on laboratory training. In such a way student will be able to improvise and devise among themselves what to do.”* Another professor voiced out *“students should be encouraged to be innovative and creative enough. This should be incorporated as one of the criteria in assessing their performance and products.”*

Secondly, to address the problem of the issue that online learning is seen as a boring task among the students, one professor stated that, *“find a diverse, enjoyable and engaging online course. To deter students from boredom, make sure you consider an interactive, creative and enjoyable online course.”* One also seconded *“Although in the early days of e-learning this might have been challenging, today it is much easier: a number of providers offer all types of interactive training with obstacles and experiences, images, animation, gamified approaches, simulators for game-based learning and practising.”*

Thirdly, the participants also tackled the problem concerning the technical difficulties. As one professor said, *“when designing our online lesson, we need to secure the speed of internet connection.”* Another suggested, *“we need prioritise classes where no applications or records need to be downloaded. Pay attention to the quality of the sound (a concern frequently neglected) and check out the course on several devices and apps and operating systems as you do the class in front of the pupils.”* Moreover, one stressed out *“select online courses with an easy yet comprehensive help page, a thorough FAQ section and an excellent service for students. If the online course has a chat service, email address and platform to fix technical problems, you should rest assured the technology will not be a challenge and will not hamper the learning process.”*

Lastly, as regards the problem of time-consuming, one professor said that *“we need to ensure the lessons are split into several areas and consist of short courses that can be completed in a short time. If students encounter big obstacles to learning, they possibly will never have the time to deal with them. Divide the races and win.”* Another professor noted that, *“Don't worry of setting a deadline. You can't set deadlines because the lessons are online. Set a*

*clear and easy schedule showing when each section of an online course should have been completed. Send reminders to students that they have little space and the course is expected to be completed.”*

## **Conclusion**

The study assessed the University Education in the KSA in the crisis-fraught situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the context of Saudi Electronic University and Qassim University. It employed quantitative and qualitative research design. Results revealed that, the teachers and students of both universities assessed the status of online learning modality “very good” during the pandemic. The overall rating on the level of the skill of teachers and students using online learning modality is very good. This indicates that both students and teachers are capable of using and engaging themselves. As for the assessment of the students and teachers’ attitudes and beliefs in relation to the online learning implementation, generally, both students and teachers assessed themselves to have a favourable attitude and belief. This shows that Saudi universities have already embraced the use of online learning even before the onslaught of the pandemic. Students cannot apply the learning they gained to actual experience, online learning is somewhat boring, and technical difficulties are the problems that frequently emerged on the conduct of online learning for both universities. Suggestions were also presented by the respondents to provide solutions to the identified problems of the status of online learning in the KSA.

## **Implications to Practice and Limitation of the Study**

Despite reservations, HEI workers are inspired to home-schooling activity. The following are the implications to practice, first, as the workforce is evolving and adapting to new expectations in the higher education environment, they will provide ongoing support, training, and development, and be given ways to better appreciate and expand the possibilities of online education. The teachers must also learn to take up the educational issues brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, and see online learning as an enticing opportunity. Secondly, there is a need to maintain and enhance the effective online learning modality of the universities. Thirdly, the suggestions and recommendations presented by the respondents should be taken seriously by the administration as to implement online learning effectively, because this helps in catering to the emerging needs of the students. The present study, nonetheless, is only limited to a short period of time; hence, a longer study should be conducted. Moreover, there is a need for a study on the faculty's perception of online learning according to their demographic and work-related factors.

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