

# Reflections On The Experience Of Mandating Lecture Attendance In One School Of Nursing In The Republic Of Ireland\*

Therese Leufer  
Joanne Cleary-Holdforth

Dublin City University

## Abstract

Attendance levels at lectures amongst university students appears to be a universal challenge. While the university culture generally does not embrace a mandatory attendance policy, the debate concerning the implications of non-attendance continues amongst educators. The literature in this area does little to dampen the debate, offering apparently sound rationale on both sides of the argument. Non-attendance is of particular concern when there is a professional element to a programme, such as Nursing. Student non-attendance at lectures may elicit tensions between professional and academic values, particularly when a mandatory attendance policy is being seriously considered within a department. Advice from professional regulatory bodies in this area is frequently ambiguous, compounding the dilemma for academics in the higher education sector resulting in a variety of local interpretations. Further input from the relevant regulatory bodies would be useful in this regard. The underlying motivation for generating policies that mandate attendance must be given careful thought to ensure that the implications for all potential stakeholders are duly considered. Reasons for student non-attendance at university lectures are many and varied and the perceived link between attendance and academic achievement is an area that requires further scrutiny. More innovative, student-centred approaches to teaching, learning and assessment could encourage greater levels of engagement with the programme of education. This needs to be considered at both an individual and departmental level if student learning opportunities are to be truly maximised.

**Keywords:** Attendance, Mandating attendance, Lectures, Students, Academic achievement, Nursing, Profession.

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## 1. Background

Attendance at university lectures seems to be an on-going challenge that appears to transcend country, university and discipline. One need only sample the international literature from countries including Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. on this subject to appreciate the magnitude of this phenomenon (Doyle et al. 2008; Gump 2005; McCarey et al. 2007; Sharma et al. 2005; Nicholl & Timmins 2005; Hughes 2005; Hunter & Tetley 1999; Longhurst 1999). It is a phenomenon that is both intriguing and frustrating and yet there is very little evidence of university or governmental policy relating to it. It is generally accepted that university is a rite of passage for its students and is, therefore, as much about a 'coming of age' and the development of autonomous adults, as it is about training and education per se (Doyle et al. 2008; Bourgeois et al. 1999). This culture, therefore, does not support mandatory attendance. Consequently, policy on attendance is often non-existent and where it does exist, it certainly seems to vary not only from university to university but even from department to department (Cohn & Johnson 2006; Leufer 2006). Attendance does become an issue, however, where there is a professional element to the programme, such as Nursing, where clinical practice and public safety are key and where registration with the relevant professional regulatory bodies, such as An Bord Altranais, in the case of Ireland and the Nursing and Midwifery Council in the case of the U.K. for example, is essential in order to practice as a nurse. Such regulatory bodies stipulate a high minimum number of practice and instruction hours in both clinical and theoretical content which are determined ultimately by European Union (EU) directives. Such directives can lead to tensions between the professional and academic values of a programme.

In the school of nursing where the authors are employed, poor attendance levels at lectures have been a concern and have been addressed by the lecturing team. As a consequence a mandatory attendance policy was adopted. Mandating attendance at lectures within the higher education sector is a cause for debate particularly within academic schools of nursing, given their professional requirements.

Some would argue that fostering and maintaining levels of enthusiasm among students by adopting more innovative approaches to teaching, learning and assessing, such as problem based learning rather than the traditional lecture will negate the need to mandate attendance. However, depending on class sizes it is not always practical or indeed possible to implement such approaches, particularly when student numbers in core classes can and do exceed 200. As a result of such numbers, there is a heavy reliance on lectures in the school in question. Attendance by students at these lectures is therefore considered very important by many nurse educators. Tutorials and seminars are also utilised but attendance at these, while desirable, is not required. In a study by Timmins & Kaliszzer (2002b; 2002a), which examined attitudes to absenteeism, over 90% of nurse educators agreed that there are specific lectures that students must attend, thus reinforcing the emphasis on lecture-type delivery in nursing programmes.

There are numerous reasons why students don't attend lectures and the link between academic achievement and attendance at lectures continues to provide hotly debated terrain. With professional considerations in mind; the need to address the issue of students non-attendance at lectures, the link between academic achievement and lecture attendance and finally whether attendance at lectures should be mandated will be considered below.

## 2. Professional Considerations for Nurses

Nurse education in Ireland has undergone a dramatic change in a very short period of time, moving from a three year hospital-based apprenticeship model of training in 1995 to a three year hospital-based diploma and subsequently to a four year full time University degree in 2002. While nurse education programmes are now integrated into the University setting, students are still required to spend approximately 50% of the overall programme engaged in clinical practice in allied healthcare settings. Attendance at this element of the programme is mandatory and non-negotiable. Students must attend 100% of clinical placements and may not progress in the programme until this requirement has been satisfied on an annual basis. This element of the programme is necessary in order to satisfy learning outcomes within domains of competence specified for clinical practice by An Bord Altranais (2005). Clinical attendance therefore must be verified and documented for each student by his/her clinical preceptor on a daily basis and must be submitted to the academic staff in advance of university exam boards. All time missed from clinical placements must be made up by the student in order to meet An Bord Altranais requirements.

Clinical learning, which is paramount in hands-on professions such as nursing, must be underpinned, in the first instance, and thereafter augmented by theoretical instruction. The theoretical content of nursing programmes has increased significantly since the demise of the apprenticeship model with a greater emphasis on research and evidence-based practice (Leufer & Cleary-Holdforth 2007; Cleary-Holdforth & Leufer 2008; Leufer & Cleary-Holdforth 2009). Student non-attendance for theoretical instruction is a concern now more than ever for nurse educators as this may pose ramifications for the profession and indeed for public safety. As Timmins & Kaliszer (2002b) note, hospital based schools of nursing treated students as hospital employees. Absenteeism was considered a disciplinary matter and missed time greater than two days required medical certification. With the assimilation of nurse education into the higher education sector, it perhaps could be suggested that nurse educators found themselves in somewhat unfamiliar territory where greater student autonomy prevailed and the previously stringent monitoring of attendance was not a university requirement. In the spirit of integration into the university culture, schools of nursing strived to embrace such changes. However, nurse educators remained cognisant of and concerned about the professional requirements as stipulated by the regulatory body and questioned whether the new university-based programme could ensure that these requirements would be satisfied. This question tends to be raised as the core concern by nurse educators when the subject of attendance at lectures is raised. Perhaps the more pertinent question that needs to be asked is why are lecture attendance levels less than desirable? It is worth noting that An Bord Altranais does not specify the teaching method by which the theoretical outcomes are achieved. Anecdotally,

nurse educators are keen to embrace a wide variety of student centred learning approaches in addition to lectures but constraints such as large student numbers, reduced staff numbers, budgets and environmental logistics render this aspiration challenging to say the least.

As previously indicated, EU requirements specify that undergraduate pre-registration nursing programmes in the Republic of Ireland provide a minimum number of hours in both clinical and theoretical instruction over the course of the four year programme. The requirements specify that no less than one third of the total (4,600) number of hours are devoted to theoretical instruction and that no less than one half are devoted to clinical instruction (An Bord Altranais 2005, p. 20). These requirements have mandatory status under Council Directive 89/595/EEC. From the academic perspective, An Bord Altranais (2005) requires that nursing students are provided with no less than 1,533 hours of theoretical instruction. Depending on the style and, to a lesser degree, the subject of theoretical instruction, those 1,533 hours may be a positive, pleasant, constructive experience for students or plain drudgery. Demonstrating that theoretical requirements have been met in the absence of a monitoring system where such mandatory requirements are attached presents a dilemma. Previously, in the afore-mentioned school of nursing for example, students who elected not to attend lectures but successfully attained pass grades in theoretical modules were permitted to progress within the programme. This caused difficulty for some nurse educators within that school, as previously alluded to. Some felt that attendance should be made mandatory and that progression through the programme be dependent on both lecture attendance and success in assessments.

Following on from an internal school debate a decision was made to mandate attendance at lectures. Consequently, an attendance policy was developed for both students and lecturers in the school alike. Student attendance at every lecture became mandatory and was strictly monitored. Repercussions of non-attendance were clearly laid out in the policy. Furthermore, penalties for non-attendance, such as additional coursework, were devised and actively enforced. This system had clear implications for all stakeholders involved. It is important to note that while An Bord Altranais require higher education institutions to declare their attendance monitoring systems, they do not, however, stipulate or provide guidance in relation to how such 'attendance monitoring' should be enforced or indeed how to deal with the results of attendance monitoring (in particular poor- or non-attending students). In their 'Requirements and Standards for Nurse Registration Education Programmes', An Bord Altranais (2005, p. 41) simply state that "the process of monitoring student attendance in respect of the theoretical and clinical practice experience requirements is declared". Therefore systems of managing attendance monitoring that are established within schools of nursing are entirely a consequence of local interpretation and/or preference.

### 3. Academic Considerations

It is generally accepted that all students do not learn in the same way or at the same pace. Nor does simply 'spoon-feeding' information to students guarantee that learning will occur (Curzon 2003; Bastable 2003; Reece & Walker 2002; Quinn 2000). Each learner will have individual strengths, limitations and needs. It is, therefore, imperative that a variety of

teaching, learning and assessment strategies are employed that reflect and respond to these diverse needs. However, the main teaching strategy employed in university tends to be the lecture (Gatherer & Manning 1998), which is perceived as a teacher-centred rather than a student-centred approach to education (O'Neill & McMahon 2005; Bastable 2003; Reece & Walker 2002). Lectures are designed for delivery of information to the masses and do not lend themselves to interaction, discussion or very much active learning in a way that is meaningful to the individual student (Cleary-Holdforth 2007). With large student numbers in class promoting active engagement may prove difficult with the result that some students may elect not to attend (Leufer 2007). It is interesting to note that the average undergraduate class size in the authors' school ranges from 200-250 students.

It is arguably a challenge in such circumstances to implement alternative, innovative, student-centred approaches to education. Based on international definitions of class size, 200-250 can be considered a 'very large' class (Mateo & Fernandez 1996). Levels of interaction and participation in class have been shown to vary in quantity, quality and duration depending on the size of the class (Gibbs et al. 1996; Blatchford et al. 2004) with cognitive level of interactions among student groups declining as the group size increases (Mahler et al. 1986). In a large class students may feel the lecturer is not interested in their contributions, or indeed only has time for those sitting at the front of the class (Leufer 2007). Perhaps there is some truth in the phrase coined by Robert G. Ingersoll when he asserted that "colleges are places where pebbles are polished and diamonds are dimmed." Yet, despite what the literature suggests, 'attendance' at lectures continues to be an issue for some nurse educators' due to their positive perception of the lecture's academic value and professional contribution (Gump 2005; Cohn & Johnson 2006; Rodgers 2002; Timmins & Kaliszer 2002b; Longhurst 1999).

Longhurst (1999) affirms that student absenteeism results in inadequate learning, disruption in class and compromised performance. However, is this confidence in the value of class attendance misplaced? From an anecdotal perspective, compelling students to attend lectures results in the situation where there are some students in class who simply do not want to be there. Surely this situation lends itself more readily to class disruption? Mere attendance (at least in the physical sense) is not a guarantee that learning will occur. Hunter & Tetley (1999, p. 5) remark that some students, even when they do attend, spend the time talking, sleeping or reading the newspaper as opposed to actively engaging in the learning context. Again, anecdotally, with technological advances, students can (and do) attend class accompanied by various mobile technologies, which facilitate texting, tweeting, blogging and e-mailing to mention but a few 'extra-curricular' activities thus affording students further opportunities to 'virtually' absent themselves from class, despite the best efforts of lecturers or indeed the existence of an attendance policy.

From the literature reviewed, it would seem that students undertaking university courses skip classes on a not infrequent basis (Cohn & Johnson 2006; Hughes 2005; Rodgers 2002). The question of why students do not attend class is often raised. Numerous studies have investigated non-attendance and have uncovered the many reasons that students proffer as explanations (Doyle et al. 2008; Gump 2005; Nicholl & Timmins 2005; Hughes 2005; Timmins & Kaliszer 2002b; Hunter & Tetley 1999; Longhurst 1999). Such reasons include family, social

and work commitments, illness, faking illness, family emergencies, faking family emergencies, to mention but a few. Clearly some of these are valid reasons that occur as a consequence of life circumstances, life events and the changing student profile. Unfortunately, the attendance policy adopted in the authors' school offered minimal latitude for even the most genuine cases of non-attendance, which was, in our opinion, an inherent weakness that contributed significantly to its eventual demise.

St. Clair (1999, p. 177), introducing an emotional link to class attendance, suggests that students' perceptions of their teachers may also influence their approaches to learning and subsequently have an influence on their decision to attend lectures or not. According to Fleming (1992) one of the reasons given by students for not attending class is poor quality of lecturing, in addition to competing assessment pressures, timing of lectures and poor lecture content. In a later study Fleming (1995) found that 40% of respondents' reasons for not attending were due to "the pressure of other learning tasks" (p. 1).

In their 1999 study, Hunter & Tetley interviewed 168 full-time students about their reasons for attending or not attending lectures. This information is of tremendous value to educators as it provides direction with regard to what students want from lectures, what excites them and, ultimately, what may encourage them to attend (Cleary-Holdforth 2007). Lectures that these students would not miss were those they found interesting, those that were difficult and hard to make up, those that they considered important to their degree, those in which there was a lot of material given out, or those lectures in popular subjects or where the lecturer was perceived to be good. Nevertheless some students perceive lecture attendance as unnecessary despite many lecturers adopting the contrary view (Timmins & Kaliszer 2002a).

Hunter and Tetley (1999) highlight the dearth of available research into what students actually think the purpose of lectures is. Hassel and Lourey (2005) suggest that we as educators have a significant role in imparting to students "the habits of the mind" (p. 3) while Hunter and Tetley (1999) discuss the role of the lecturer in conveying "the procedures and assumptions of the discipline" (p. 6). Hunter and Tetley go on to question whether students are in a position to decipher such information from lecture notes alone thus highlighting the significant gains to be made from class attendance. Nurse educators for example, frequently recount personal experiences from clinical nursing practice to students in class, providing a potential bridge between theory and practice for the inexperienced student nurse.

Students come to college for a number of reasons. In the case of students studying nursing, the desire to practice as a nurse should feature alongside other motivating factors. However Hassel and Lourey (2005) note that students are often unaware of how to attain their goals once they commence a programme of study. Such uncertainty may include questioning the 'need' to attend lectures and whether there is any significance or benefit in attending. If they do not see a value then they may not in fact attend (St. Clair 1999). Such students who are academically stronger or more self-directed in nature are likely to seek the information elsewhere and probably succeed but not necessarily excel, while those who have less academic prowess or who are less motivated are likely to struggle to pass (Sharma et al. 2005).

## 4. Attendance and Academic Achievement – What's the Link?

Much of the discussion surrounding attendance monitoring in higher education centres around the perceived link between attendance and academic achievement. In the authors' school, for example, there was a prevalent view that students who attended class regularly had greater levels of academic achievement in so far as they did better on formal assessment than their non-/poor-attending counterparts. The evidence demonstrating a link between attendance and academic achievement is still a matter for much debate and in more fields than Nursing alone.

Hunter and Tetley (1999) argue that attendance does not affect exam performance and note that pass rates in universities have increased over the years as attendance rates have fallen. St. Clair (1999) when arguing against mandatory attendance policies suggests that research evidence on the relationship between attendance rates or attendance policy and academic achievement is inconclusive. Chan et al. (1997, p. 58) also examined the perceived link between attendance and student performance using two empirical models. The TOBIT model demonstrated a positive relationship between attendance and student performance but only a weak relationship was seen with Heckman's two-stage model. Chan et al. (1997) concluded that a mandatory attendance policy does not improve student performance. They suggest that attendance should be encouraged but not necessarily mandated.

Gatherer & Manning (1998) undertook a correlational study to investigate the relationship between lecture attendance and examination performance on a first year biological sciences programme. The findings of this study reveal a weak but statistically significant positive correlation between lecture attendance and examination performance. Interestingly, this correlation was more pronounced in the ethnic minority groups in the sample. This is particularly relevant and useful information given the increasing diversity of the student body. Cohn & Johnson (2006) examined the relationship between class attendance and examination performance in a sample of 347 students studying economics. Their findings demonstrated a strong positive correlation between class attendance and academic performance. McCarey et al's (2007) study explored the predictors of academic performance in a cohort of nursing students. One of the variables under investigation as a predictor was non-attendance. Results demonstrated that attendance was a significant predictor of performance with increasing non-attendance being consistently associated with poorer marks.

On the other hand, a study by Rogers (2002) suggests no relationship between attendance and academic performance. Rodgers (2002) implemented an incentive scheme in an undergraduate introductory statistics module. In practice, each student's overall mark was reduced by 1% for every tutorial missed in excess of two. The students' attendance and performance were compared with the performance of students' who undertook the same module in the previous academic year prior to the introduction of the incentive scheme. The results of this study indicate that while attendance did improve, it did not translate to improved academic performance, even when the 'penalty points' that had been deducted for non-attendance were added back on to the students' overall marks.

Another possible determinant of student attendance is the increased availability of teaching and learning technology such as Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) which offer potential advantages to both the lecturer and student. By increasing exposure to information via technology one could potentially enhance student performance (Weatherly et al. 2003). It could however have the opposite effect with students electing not to attend lectures due to the accessibility of lecture content outside the classroom. Weatherly et al. (2003) investigated the impact on exam performance of providing students with lecture slides. The class with access to slides demonstrated decreased exam performance compared to those without access. This finding suggests that decreased exam performance may be the outcome of poor attendance due to availability of lecture slides. Grabe (2005) examined the relationship between students' use of online notes as a substitute for attending class and their examination performance on an introductory psychology module. No difference in examination performance was seen between those students who frequently used notes as a replacement for at least six classes and those students who used online notes as an adjunct to rather than an alternative to class attendance.

The variety of studies, study settings and student profiles in the literature examined suggests no definitive consensus or indeed evidence to support the assertion that a mandatory attendance policy will result in higher academic achievement for students. This assertion is not therefore an argument that can or should be used to underpin an attendance policy.

## 5. Attendance Polices – the way forward?

As the literature demonstrates, there are mixed and inconclusive findings in relation to the relationship between attendance and academic performance. Consequently, there is insufficient evidence of this nature on which to base an attendance policy.

The attendance policy in the authors' school gave rise to many difficulties, both for students and staff alike. A number of problems became evident from the outset. In light of the large student numbers and the presence of two 'card swipe-in' devices per lecture theatre, the 'swiping-in' process was extremely protracted and encroached heavily into class time. Furthermore, the system did not prevent students from engaging in subversive behaviour such as 'swiping in' on behalf of fellow-students despite the threat of disciplinary action for such misdemeanours. Spot checks (another time-consuming endeavour) in class frequently failed to detect this anomaly. In the case of students who were not in possession of their student cards, nurse educators were required to remain back after class to sign hard copies of attendance records for such students, which could equate to anything up to 10-15% of the class numbers particularly at the beginning of term. Although the policy did allow a 20% non-attendance by students per module (but not without penalty), thereby providing for absences due to minor illness or imposition, where a student's non-attendance exceeded this, albeit genuine and verified, little scope existed to avoid heavy penalty. Penalties for non-attendance varied from additional work assigned to the student following exam boards at which a fail was awarded for the module(s) in question (with a repeat attempt incurring financial cost) to repeat of the module in total in the subsequent academic year, thereby adding an additional year to a



four year degree programme, according to the level of non-attendance incurred.

The system also impacted on the lecturing staff in a number of ways. For example, in addition to the aforementioned inconveniences, academic staff were frequently inundated with attendance related email queries from students throughout term, despite each student being in possession of a copy of the attendance policy and having access to their individual attendance records online. In advance of exam boards, staff had the added burden of trawling through each student's attendance record to ensure that they had attended at least 80% of classes in order to be eligible to receive the attained pass award in the module. Academic staff were required to set and assign additional work for students to whom they had awarded a fail for attendance reasons alone, even in cases where students had passed the module assessment. This system also had repercussions for administrative staff and computer services in the storage, maintenance and generation of attendance reports and records.

It is perhaps understandable therefore that the policy to mandate attendance in the authors' school was subsequently abandoned. Nonetheless there are valuable lessons to be learned from both sides of that particular debate in providing a way forward that facilitates and encourages rather than mandates student attendance and indeed performance. Frequently the justification for mandating lecture attendance is attributed to a grave concern for academic achievement and future attainment levels. The literature, however, as previously stated, does not support this stance. This begs the question of the purpose of a mandatory attendance policy. Is it to ensure safe service provision or is it perhaps more self-serving than this ([Leufer 2006](#))? Perhaps the time and energy invested in developing and implementing such policies would be better spent in areas such as closer examination of teaching, learning and assessment strategies within departments in an effort to maximise the teaching and learning experience for all concerned.

In terms of accepting the premise that attendance has a positive influence on academic achievement, are students the only benefactors? Shimoff and Cantina ([2001](#)) argue how in some cases it could be somewhat self-serving if instructors for example ensure that some test questions are based solely on material presented in class (p. 192). This in turn will encourage attendance and grades are seen to improve. An entirely reasonable exchange perhaps? Awarding credit towards final grades for attendance is another policy that may have positive influence on attendance levels ([Hancock 1994](#)). Is this misleading however? In the first instance if lecturers believe that academic achievement is linked to attendance yet a penalty is imposed for not attending, is it justified to infer that attendance positively influences achievement? Also, where content directly related to exams is presented in class as an incentive to attend and grades subsequently improve, can the gain be solely attributed to attendance? If students were provided with similar incentives via electronically available lecture notes and attained equally well academically, what if any is the contribution of lecture attendance? Making grades contingent on attendance could in fact contribute to grade hyperinflation. Gump ([2005](#)) questions the value of attendance (and class participation) in assessing student achievement, a view shared by Cross et al. ([1993](#)) who recommend that instructors "not contaminate grades with non-achievement factors such as effort, attendance, attitude, conduct, or class participation" (p. 23).

Who then are the beneficiaries or, conversely, who are the losers when a mandatory attendance policy is implemented? The ideal outcomes are that the student achieves irrespective of underlying motivation, the course is successful with strong grades evident, and the institution maintains a track record of excellence in teaching and learning. The outcomes of any policy however are arguably reliant on the structures underpinning it. It is, for example, imperative that local policies mirror accurately the guidance outlined by the regulatory body, without adding to or subtracting from it (Cleary-Holdforth & Leufer 2009). Barwuah and Walkley (1997) suggest that monitoring attendance is crucial to providing management information on which to base budgetary and planning decisions. It can also provide an early warning sign for students that are likely to fail, or indeed the success of a course. On the other hand, policies that penalise students for non-attendance who have otherwise successfully passed their coursework must be considered with regard to their purpose. The question still remains therefore, who is best served by mandating student attendance at lectures in third level programmes?

## 6. Conclusion

It is evident from the professional literature that student non-attendance is a universal problem, one that transcends country, university and discipline. "It is little short of a miracle that modern methods of instruction have not already completely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry" (Albert Einstein, 1879-1955). Perhaps this is what university students have in mind when they choose to absent themselves from lectures. The need to ensure graduates are safe practitioners is not only a matter of professional integrity but also a matter of public concern, and one about which there can be no debate. How best we ensure our students receive a high quality preparation in light of poor attendance levels is of paramount importance. Having consulted the literature, we recommend further exploration of lecture non-attendance, particularly at a local level to inform future practice in specific contexts. There is little merit in instigating a mandatory policy, for example, if institutional factors that impact on attendance remain unchanged. The initial impetus for generating attendance policies also needs to be considered carefully. It is imperative that there is a shared understanding of the underlying rationale for such policies. It is equally important that the underlying rationale is legitimate and that the policy is fit for purpose to ensure that it achieves the benefits and outcomes that it claims without disadvantaging any of the key stakeholders. In light of the authors' experience and in keeping with the regulatory body's requirements, a more pragmatic way forward would entail the monitoring of students' attendance in the absence of a mandatory attendance policy. In this way, current professional requirements can be met without the additional difficulties and stresses for all concerned that arose as a result of mandating attendance. Further insight and clarification from the regulatory body regarding their requirements for attendance monitoring would be welcomed and would undoubtedly prove invaluable in informing future policy and practice, coupled with clear guidance regarding attendance levels, repercussions for non-attendance and the management of these situations.

From an educational viewpoint, it is perhaps opportune to invest further time and resources both to individual educators and to schools for the exploration of alternative student-centred teaching, learning and assessment strategies that might prove useful for large student groups. Ensuring that the learning experience for third level students is both positive and productive should be the central tenet of our role as educators. After all, as William Butler Yeats is reputed to have said, "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire."

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