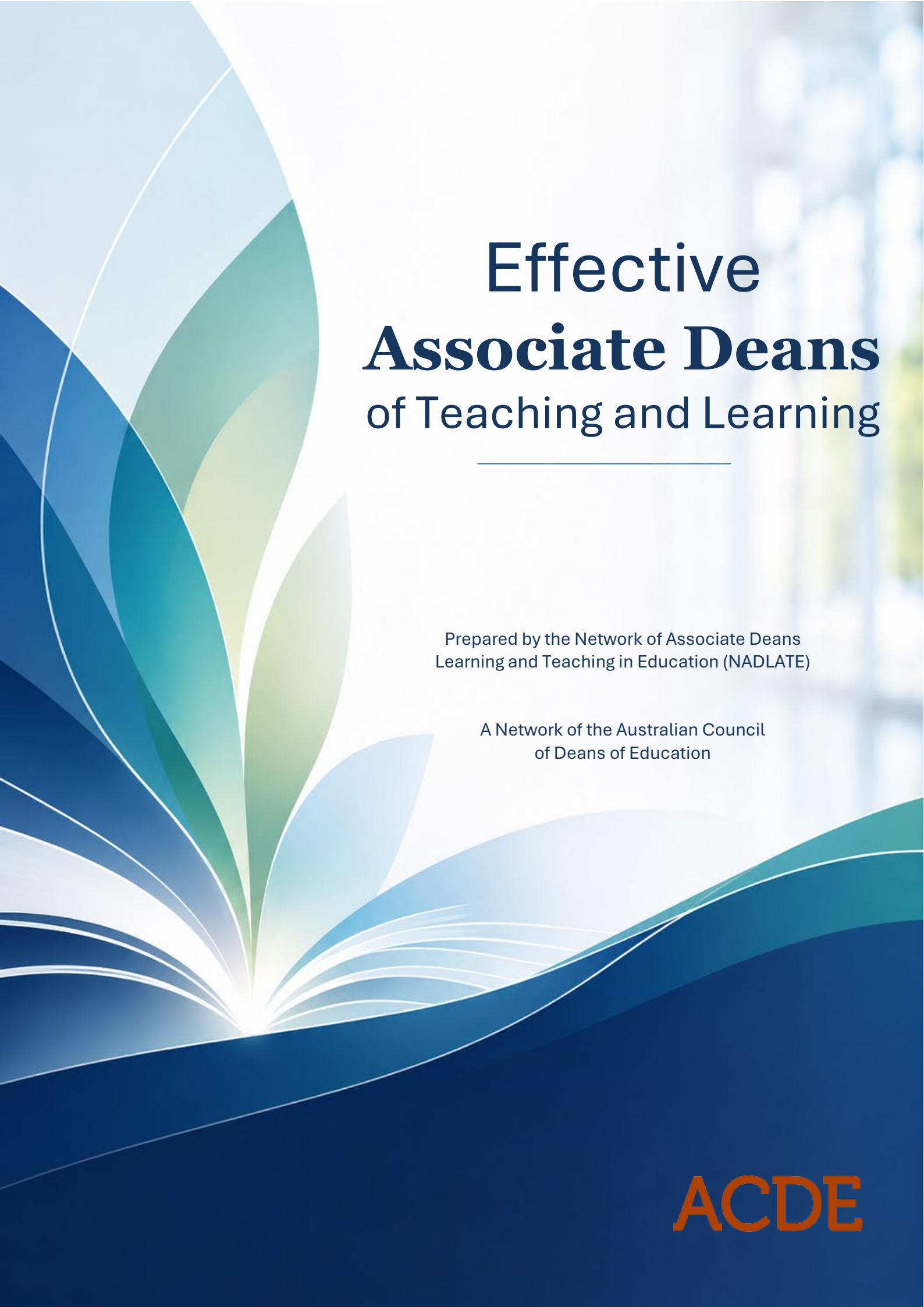




Effective **Associate Deans** of Teaching and Learning

Prepared by the Network of Associate Deans
Learning and Teaching in Education (NADLATE)

A Network of the Australian Council
of Deans of Education

ACDE

Introduction

Associate Deans of Teaching and Learning (ADTLs) occupy a unique and increasingly important position within contemporary higher education. Situated at the intersection of strategy, quality assurance, curriculum leadership, staff development, student success, and institutional change, the role requires leaders to navigate complexity while maintaining a clear focus on educational excellence. Yet despite the significance of the position, there are relatively few opportunities to learn from the experiences of those who have undertaken the role or to explore how the expectations of ADTL leadership are evolving across the sector. This booklet has been developed as a resource for current and aspiring ADTLs, interested in learning and teaching leadership within Schools of Education and beyond.

Drawing on reflections from the **NADLATE EduFuture Talk *Leading Learning and Teaching: What Makes an Effective Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning?***, this booklet brings together insights from experienced educational leaders, and reflections on the future directions of the role. Together, these contributions provide both practical guidance and strategic perspectives on what it means to lead learning and teaching in an era characterised by rapid technological change, evolving student expectations, increasing accountability, and growing demands for innovation. Rather than presenting a single model of leadership, the booklet offers a collection of ideas, experiences, and provocations intended to support reflection, professional growth, and informed leadership practice.

The Changing Landscape of Learning and Teaching Leadership

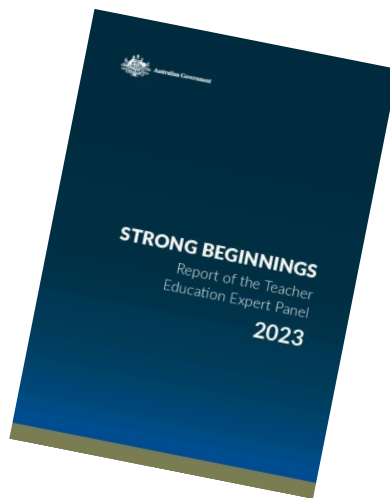
The leadership of learning and teaching within universities, particularly in Schools of Education, has become increasingly complex (Beerens, 2022). Shifting policy landscapes, and growing expectations around student experience has highlighted the need to reevaluate what teaching and learning should look like (Accord, 2025). There is a focus on both increasing equity of participation and ensuring that students have the skills necessary to be successful in today's changing world. These are admirable goals that create challenge and opportunity (Pink, 2024).



The introduction of Gen AI is challenging our traditional models of how we assess students at university and new models and course structures are having to be developed. It is imperative that we are able to capture student learning within the highly advanced technological world. Teaching and Learning leaders are pivotal in guiding credible assessment practices in universities and Schools of Education

<https://www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-09/assessment-reform-age-artificial-intelligence-discussion-paper.pdf>

In Schools of Education there are also heightened compliance and accreditation requirements (Strong beginnings, 2023). Nationally there has been the concern that Teacher Regulatory Authorities do not assess Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs consistently against the Accreditation Standards and Procedures. Core content has also been identified and mandated for inclusion in ITE courses. Within this context, the role of the Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning (ADTL) in Schools of Education has taken on renewed significance to ensure this compliance.



Advice for Current and Aspiring ADTLs

Learning Through Leadership: Reflections from the NADLATE EduFuture Talk

Leadership in learning and teaching is often spoken about in terms of strategy, structures, policy, and performance. Yet those who have undertaken these roles know that educational leadership is also deeply human work: work that requires judgement, relationships, courage, and the capacity to hold together competing priorities while keeping student learning at the centre.

It was within this spirit that the National Association of Deans of Learning and Teaching in Education (NADLATE) Steering Group hosted the EduFuture Talk **Leading Learning and Teaching: What Makes an Effective Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning?** on Thursday 12 June 2026. Bringing together leaders with extensive experience across the Australian higher education sector, the webinar created space for a thoughtful and generous conversation about one of the most influential and complex leadership positions within Schools of Education.

The session invited participants to look beyond position descriptions and organisational charts and instead explore what effective leadership of learning and teaching looks like in practice. Through reflection,

experience, and candid discussion, the panellists considered the evolving role of Associate Deans of Teaching and Learning (ADTLs) in Schools of Education: a role increasingly characterised by complexity, institutional change, quality assurance demands, curriculum renewal, innovation, and the ongoing responsibility of creating conditions in which both staff and students can flourish.

The session was chaired by NADLATE Chair: Associate Professor Paula Mildenhall and supported by NADLATE Deputy Chairs: Professor Melissa Barnes and Associate Professor Sulay Jalloh. We were privileged to hear from three distinguished educational leaders whose perspectives reflected different institutional contexts while revealing strikingly common themes. Their credentials are outlined below.

Professor Simone White, Dean of the School of Education at RMIT, offered insights into leadership as both stewardship and influence highlighting the importance of understanding policy landscapes, building communities of practice, and making visible the scholarly work of learning and teaching leadership.

Professor Donna King, National Head of the School of Education at ACU, reflected on the power of vision, collective endeavour, and creating cultures where teams can thrive while navigating ambitious agendas for improvement and innovation.

Associate Professor Ken Cliff, Associate Dean (Education) for the Faculty of Arts, Society and Business at the University of Wollongong, brought a perspective grounded in student experience, strategic awareness, and leadership that remains responsive, principled, and attentive to relationships.

Across the discussion, several ideas resonated strongly: the importance of leading with purpose, balancing compliance with creativity, developing trusted relationships, communicating with clarity, and recognising that impactful leadership is rarely achieved alone.

This booklet captures and synthesises key reflections, provocations, and practical insights shared throughout the conversation. While no single pathway exists for becoming an effective Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning, the collective wisdom offered through this dialogue provides both inspiration and practical guidance for current leaders and those aspiring to shape the future of learning and teaching in higher education.

We extend our sincere thanks to our panellists for their generosity in sharing their experiences and to all participants who contributed to the discussion. May the ideas gathered here encourage continued reflection, connection, and confident leadership across our education communities.

There were key messages from the panellists:

Simone White

Simone framed the Associate Dean Learning and Teaching role as one of the most important and demanding leadership roles in a faculty or school of education because it sits between big-picture policy and the practical realities of implementation. She described ADTLs as policy enactors and enablers and argued that effective leaders need to understand policy deeply, notice the key words, and read the rhythms of compliance across the university and school calendar. She also stressed that ADTLs should talk with colleagues and students, understand their pressures, and help others make sense of change. Just as strongly, she urged people not to hide their work: write about it, publish it, apply for awards and grants, and build a trusted community of practice.

Donna King

Donna described highly effective ADLT leadership as visible, clear, and team-based. She said the role needs a strong vision that can be translated into realistic goals over one, three, and five years. For her, the ADLT succeeds by building a strong team around them, working closely with course teams, program directors, and coordinators, and creating collective trust rather than operating alone. She also emphasised that the role is a real opportunity, a “gift”, to influence teaching and learning, lead innovation, and keep people motivated by making the work feel shared and worthwhile.

Ken Cliff

Ken argued that the most important focus is student experience, not core content alone, though core content still matters. He said ADLTs need deep knowledge of the course portfolio, a broad horizon that includes higher education trends, politics, policy, migration, workforce and accreditation, and a principled “North Star” that guides decisions. He also stressed that good leadership means being ready to change course when new information emerges. Later, he added that in difficult situations leaders should be clear about what has already been decided and where staff still have agency in how something is implemented. He also pushed the idea that relationship-building takes time and should be deliberate, especially when trust is needed across schools or teams.

From these individual perspectives, it was possible to consider overall key messages and synthesise themes.

Key messages at a glance

- Highly effective ADLTs combine strategic vision with operational credibility.
- Student experience, compliance and accreditation must all be kept in view.
- Relationships matter: trust is built through time, clarity and follow-through.
- You cannot do everything. Prioritise, sequence and set boundaries.
- The role is not just administrative - it can be a platform for scholarship, innovation and influence.

1. What highly effective leadership looks like

The panel described the ADTL role as one of the most important and most challenging leadership positions in a School of Education. Effective ADTLs sit across several layers at once: university strategy, faculty priorities, accreditation, policy, curriculum, workloads and the realities of staff and student experience.

- They have a clear vision and can explain where the school is heading.
- They understand policy and can interpret it for local use.
- They keep student experience central rather than treating it as an afterthought.
- They have a broad horizon and stay alert to higher education, workforce and political change.

Theme	What it means	Practical action
Vision	A believable direction for one, three and five years	Turn strategy into a small number of visible priorities
Policy	Knowing the rules and the language of compliance	Read the policy, translate it, then socialise it
Student experience	The everyday reality of learning, teaching and support	Ask what students will notice if this change works
Operational grip	Attention to workload, sequencing and feasibility	Use a traffic-light view: green, amber, red

2. Balancing strategy and operational reality

A reoccurring message in the webinar was that ADTLs often sit between university strategy and the day-to-day realities of staff workload, resourcing and timelines. That position is not a weakness; it is the job. The role requires translation in both directions.

- Translate abstract university priorities into concrete local actions.
- Use pilots, templates and exemplars to make expectations tangible.
- Feed operational realities back up the line instead of silently absorbing them.
- Negotiate timelines honestly when resourcing is thin.
- Choose a few priorities and finish them well rather than chasing everything.

A useful rule of thumb: if the university determines the outcome, the Faculty or School should help shape the pathway to achieve it.

3. Building trust, engagement and momentum

The panel were unanimous that influence matters more than authority in many ADTL roles. Because of that, progress depends on trust, clarity and relationship-building.

- Put people at the centre of decision-making: students, academics, professional staff and leaders.
- Give people your time, even in short, focused meetings.
- Be accessible but set boundaries so the role remains sustainable.
- Thank people often and make small wins visible.
- Create team identity around the program or accreditation goal, not just the individual unit.

“You are policy enactors, enablers and change agents.”

The practical message behind this line was simple: do not underestimate the influence that comes with the role.

4. What to do when relationships are tricky

The panel acknowledged that not every colleague will be easy to bring on the journey. Some people resist change because they are unconvinced; others need time; others simply want more agency in how the change is delivered.

- Start with listening. Find out whether the issue is principle, workload, timing or uncertainty.
- Use evidence where possible, especially when the change affects pedagogy or quality.
- Where the decision is fixed, explain the why clearly and respectfully.
- Where the pathway is still open, invite people into the design of the solution.
- If the situation becomes a genuine conflict, use the right institutional support and protocols.

5. Advice for someone stepping into the role for the first time

The strongest advice offered in the webinar was encouraging rather than cautionary: treat the appointment as a genuine opportunity. The panel described the role as a gift, a platform for influence, and an important step in leadership development.

- Be confident enough to lean into the role instead of apologising for it.
- Read the policy and know the procedures; they are your working tools.
- Work closely with your dean or head of school to define the boundaries of the role.
- Watch for risks in staffing, sustainability and accreditation early.
- Keep a scholarly eye on your work so the role does not become only administration.

6. Staying scholarly while doing the job

A strong theme in the webinar was that the role should not flatten your academic identity. Panel members urged ADTLs to document innovations, write about their practice, seek grants, share examples and pursue recognition for teaching and leadership.

- Write up innovations and pilots as scholarly work.
- Use the role to build a network of trusted colleagues and future collaborators.
- Seek teaching awards, grants and publications where appropriate.
- Treat local problem-solving as a source of evidence and insight.
- Do not hide the work - showcase it.

7. A practical checklist for the first 90 days

Focus	Actions
Know the landscape	Read the relevant policies, accreditation documents, workload rules and key strategic plans.
Build relationships	Meet the dean, heads of school, discipline leads, program directors and professional staff.

Clarify priorities	Identify 2-3 priorities only and sequence them realistically.
Map risks	Check staffing, unit coordination, accreditation deadlines and student experience pain points.
Create visibility	Set up a simple rhythm for updates, follow-up and reporting.
Protect your bandwidth	Set boundaries early so the role is sustainable.

Closing thought

The webinar closed on a clear message: the ADTL role is complex, but it is also meaningful, influential and full of possibility. The people who do it well are not the ones who try to do everything. They are the ones who combine judgement, relationships, evidence and calm persistence.

Conclusion

The role of the Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning continues to evolve as universities respond to changing educational, technological, social, and policy environments. Despite the diversity of contexts in which ADTLs operate, the reflections in this booklet demonstrate a shared commitment to enhancing student learning, supporting academic colleagues, fostering innovation, and providing leadership grounded in both strategic vision and practical wisdom. The experiences of the NADLATE panellists, together with the examples of contemporary role expectations and future challenges, illustrate that effective leadership in learning and teaching is built not only on expertise and compliance, but also on relationships, collaboration, adaptability, and a deep belief in the transformative power of education.

As higher education continues to change, the need for thoughtful, evidence-informed, and courageous learning and teaching leadership will only grow. It is our hope that this booklet serves not only as a source of information, but also as an invitation for ongoing dialogue about the future of educational leadership. Whether you are new to the role, considering a leadership pathway, or an experienced ADTL seeking fresh perspectives, the insights shared here remind us that leadership is ultimately a collective endeavour. It is one that shapes not only programs and policies, but also the experiences and opportunities of the students and educators we serve.

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Gen AI declaration

This booklet used Gen AI to synthesise ideas and proofread. The original transcript of the Edufuture Talk was used, and the resulting synthesis was checked by the NADLATE steering group to ensure the accuracy of the ideas presented.

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