

Testimonies of Transformation: Participants' Reflections on ZOU's Fee-Free Short Courses as Supporters of Education 5.0 Goals

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Abstract

This study investigated how participants perceived Zimbabwe Open University's (ZOU) fee-free short courses as tools for advancing developmental goals through community engagement. The research aimed to uncover how these programmes contribute to skills development, heritage preservation and inclusive growth, in alignment with Education 5.0. Zimbabwe's higher education policy emphasising teaching, research, community service, innovation and industrialisation. Guided by the Windmill Reciprocity Model, symbiotic transformative epistemology and the Open and Distance e-Learning (ODEL) philosophy, the study employed qualitative methods to gather data from purposively selected individuals who had completed at least two short courses. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation and narrative accounts. Follow-up calls and triangulated methods ensured clarity and saturation of findings. Participants widely viewed the courses as transformative, empowering them to improve livelihoods, promote cultural identity and participate meaningfully in community development. Based on the findings, the study recommends that ZOU strengthen its community engagement by leveraging its Faculty of Agriculture as a central pillar for sustainable development initiatives. It also proposes the creation of shell companies and sheltered workshops managed by trained community members, with regional campuses providing oversight. These centres could serve as innovation hubs and market outlets for indigenous products and services. To ensure long-term impact, the study advocates for the scaling up of training to intermediate levels, increased focus on indigenous knowledge systems, and the integration of civic education. It further recommends that the government support social innovation across higher education institutions through dedicated funding and collaborative research. Such initiatives would help preserve cultural heritage, promote inclusive development and ensure intergenerational transfer of traditional knowledge.

Key words: Testimonies of Transformation, Participants' Reflections ZOU's Fee-Free Short Courses, Education 5.0 Goals

Introduction

As Zimbabwe strides "Towards a Prosperous and Empowered Upper Middle-Income Society by 2030", denoted as Vision 2030, the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development (MHTEISTD) mandated all institutions of higher learning to embed the principles of community-led Heritage-based Education 5.0 into their operations. This shift aimed to address the historically fragmented nature of university-community engagement by emphasising community-led Heritage-based Education 5.0 pillars, Teaching, Research, Community Service, Innovation and Industrialisation. Universities initially emerged in medieval Europe to train elites, like religious leaders, military and administrative officers centring on teaching and scholarship, marked by corporate autonomy and academic freedom (Perkin, 2007; Alemu, 2018). However, they were often criticised as isolated ivory towers, disconnected from societal needs (Butterfield & Soska, 2004). Over time, their functions expanded from solely intellectual pursuits as advocated by Newman (1852) to include societal relevance and community engagement. This paradigm shift is well-

documented in the MHEISTD's Strategic Plan and the Minister's Action Plan 2021 - 2025 community-led Heritage-based Education 5.0. Universities are, thus, redefined as agents of knowledge creation, whose local applicability underpins sustainable development (Council on Higher Education, 2020). Community engagement today is understood as a collaborative process wherein universities work with local stakeholders to co-design initiatives, boost livelihoods and address social challenges (Quillinan et al., 2018; Department of Health, 2013). In Zimbabwe, this aligns with ODeL principles and the NDS 1 mandate to extend university services beyond traditional boundaries bearing relevance, inclusivity and mutual benefit. However, the move from theoretical support to practical implementation remains uneven, with community engagement still often treated as an add-on rather than a core function (Pinheiro et al., 2015; Jacob et al., 2015).

In line with Vision 2030, the Zimbabwe MHEISTD mandated all institutions of higher learning to embed the principles of, community-led Heritage-based Education 5.0 into their operations. This shift aimed to address the historically fragmented nature of university-community engagement by emphasising on the pillars, Teaching, Research, Community Service, Innovation and Industrialisation. Universities initially emerged in medieval Europe to train elites, like religious leaders, military officers and administrative centring on teaching and scholarship, marked by corporate autonomy and academic freedom (Perkin, 2012; Alemu, 2018). However, they were often criticised as isolated ivory towers, disconnected from societal needs (Butterfield & Soska, 2004). Over time, their functions expanded from solely intellectual pursuits as advocated by Newman (1852) to include societal relevance and community engagement. This paradigm shift, now formalised in national strategies such as the Zimbabwe's community-led Heritage-based, Education 5.0, redefines universities as agents of knowledge creation, its local application and its sustainable development (Council on Higher Education, 2020). Community engagement today is understood as a collaborative process wherein universities work with local stakeholders to co-design initiatives, boost livelihoods and address social challenges (Quillinan et al., 2018; Department of Health, 2013). In Zimbabwe, this aligns with ODeL principles and the NDS 1 mandate to extend university services beyond traditional boundaries, bearing relevance, inclusivity and mutual benefit. However, the move from theoretical support to practical implementation remains uneven, with community engagement still often treated as an add-on rather than a core function (Pinheiro et al., 2015).

Despite policy momentum, community engagement often remains marginal. Critics argue that it is perceived as philanthropic window-dressing, resisted by academics who fear it undermines academic freedom and intellectual rigor (Hall, 2010). The conceptual ambiguity around social innovation and lack of measurable outcomes further hinders its uptake (Pinheiro et al., 2015). Without proper incentives, time allocation, institutional support or recognition in performance frameworks, faculties are disinclined to invest in engagement activities (Butin, 2012; Waghid & Davids, 2020).

Universities worldwide adopt different models. Some see engagement as a platform for disseminating knowledge and technology (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008), while others focus on digital outreach. A growing number, however, emphasise reciprocal partnerships, recognising communities as co-producers of knowledge (Holland & Ramaley, 2008). As Bharwan (2017) notes, community engagement is most effective when integrated into curricula and research agendas, as urged by Education 5.0, rather than being executed as peripheral community service. Resource constraints are a major barrier. Community engagement is typically underfunded compared to research and teaching (Butin, 2012). Additionally, the traditional structure of academia resists the messy, relational work required for genuine community integration

(Butin, 2007). Institutional priorities, shaped by neoliberal trends and corporate university models, often sideline social relevance in favour of grant attainment and market-oriented research (Giroux, 2015; MacGregor, 2014).

Zimbabwe's higher education context is ripe for such integration. Under Vision 2030 and Education 5.0, universities are expected to enact heritage-based, community-led engagement. However, implementation remains fragmented. ZOU's partnership with Angel of Hope Foundation demonstrates a proactive response, offering need-based, fee-free short courses in each province. Participants' feedback from this initiative provides timely insights into how reciprocal, structured engagement can drive sustain. In response, scholars call for a recalibration, universities must balance academic excellence with meaningful community engagement, embracing social innovation as a core mission (Cloete et al., 2011; Giroux, 2017). This includes rethinking governance, funding models, curricula and performance criteria to embed engagement in university identity and operations.

ZOU responded to this policy by partnering with the Angel of Hope Foundation, launching fee-free short courses across all ten provinces. These courses targeted underserved communities and sought to blend academic knowledge with practical, livelihood-oriented skills. Beyond supporting the humanitarian mission of the Angel of Hope Foundation, the initiative fulfilled national calls for inclusive, locally relevant and development-oriented educational strategies. Given the paucity of literature on how universities in Zimbabwe can effectively drive social innovation, this study seeks to document participants' experiences, highlight best practices and offer insights into future educational programming under community-led Heritage based Education 5.0.

Reciprocity was a central guiding principle for the ZOU short courses. According to Bharwan (2023), reciprocity is a persuasive force that creates cycles of giving and receiving. In the ZOU model, communities received free education, applied the knowledge locally, built social capital and were motivated to give back through community improvement. Figure 1 illustrates this dynamic process, showing how a cycle of knowledge and development emerged between ZOU and communities, rooted in mutual respect and empowerment. Furthermore, to ensure successful implementation, ZOU deployed a model akin to a Windmill, where the hub represents ZOU and its partners coordinated the initiative, the blades represents various faculties providing expertise via short courses, the base represents the Faculty of Agriculture as grounded the initiative in community-relevant practice and the generated energy represented social innovations like entrepreneurship, skills transfer and local business creation. This model encouraged cross-departmental collaboration and proposed the establishment of sheltered workshops and shell companies to sustain the gains made through training.

The symbiotic transformative conceptual framework also guided this study. This framework draws from Mezirow's transformative learning theory. It sees learning as a mutual and transformative experience where learners engage in self-reflection, reassess cultural and socio-economic assumptions, gains new roles in society and apply new knowledge to drive social change. Additionally, both John Dewey and Paulo Freire provided the ideological grounding for this study where Dewey emphasised experiential, democratic learning while Freire emphasised on promoting critical consciousness and liberation through education. ZOU's short courses were thus not merely educational events, but opportunities for learners to challenge their circumstances, engage their communities and become agents of change.

Materials and Methods

This study adopted a qualitative approach underpinned by a phenomenological research design to explore participants lived experiences during and after Zimbabwe Open University's (ZOU) fee-free short course training sessions. This approach was chosen because it provides rich, in-depth insight into human experiences and allows the participants' voices to emerge authentically, supported by verbatim accounts. As Creswell (2003) and Marvasti (2004) assert, qualitative research is ideal for capturing complex social phenomena and answering exploratory questions such as "what," "how," and "why."

Phenomenology focuses specifically on the lived experiences of individuals, aligning seamlessly with qualitative methods to deepen understanding. It was particularly relevant for this study, as it enabled exploration of the thoughts, feelings and reflections of participants, helping the researcher grasp the essence of their engagement with the programme. According to Miller and Salkind (2002), phenomenological narratives should provoke reflection and offer fresh perspectives to readers, an effect this study sought to achieve. Participants in ZOU's short courses, many of whom had been out of formal education for years, underwent profound shifts in confidence, purpose and community involvement. The framework reinforced the belief that universities should evolve from passive knowledge transmitters to active agents of transformation.

The study was conducted across Zimbabwe's ten provinces, with the support of local authorities and the Angel of Hope Foundation, which played a vital role in mobilising communities for course launches and trainings. Key informants from each training session assisted in participant identification and coordination. A Methodist Assistant Reverend acted as the main key informant, helping bridge community and institutional efforts. During the rollout of the fee-free short courses, data were gathered using three main methods namely, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and personal narratives. These methods were used to trace the development of the programme, capture the experiences of participants, ZOU regional staff and other stakeholders, identify strengths and weaknesses and explore sustainability strategies for future implementation. A total of 40 participants contributed to the study. The focus group discussions participants were sampled from four faculties namely, Agriculture, Cultural Heritage, ECD and Business Entrepreneurship and Management. Each had 5 volunteer participants making it 20 participants. The semi-structured interviews had six participants selected from Law Education, Counselling and Records Management (two per programme from the six selected regionals campuses). The six narratives were from Disability Management and Sign Language, Palliative Care for the Elderly and Technology programmes where two came from each department. Additional inputs came from five Open and Distance E-learning (ODEL) students who assisted during training sessions and participants from the correctional services sector. Participants were selected based on a voluntary criterion while prioritising those who had enrolled in more than one course.

The collected data were manually coded and sorted into emerging themes and patterns. Thematic analysis was employed to synthesise findings and follow-up telephone calls were used to clarify ambiguities and verify participant accounts. Triangulation of data sources and methods enhanced the credibility of the findings since data was drawn from multiple stakeholder perspectives and data collection tools. While manual analysis allowed deep engagement with the data, it was time intensive and had too much data to condense. Future studies may benefit from software tools for efficiency. Despite limitations in sample size and the non-generalisability often associated with qualitative studies, the depth and contextual relevance of the data provide valuable insights. Triangulation, verification and multi-method

data collection strategies significantly strengthened the trustworthiness and dependability of the study's conclusions and recommendations.

Results

The findings of the study are presented thematically, combining verbatim accounts with synthesised summaries. Data was categorised according to emerging patterns and dominant themes. A recurring and powerful sentiment across all participants were appreciation for ZOU's collaboration with the Angel of Hope Foundation, which was widely viewed as a transformational initiative. Participants described the partnership as a beacon of hope, praising the fee-free short courses as a humanitarian effort that empowered them to rediscover and rebuild their lives as they contributed meaningfully to their families and communities. The shared ideology of "brick-by-brick" development and the Shona mantra "nyika inovakwa nevane vayo" (a nation is built by its own people) captured the participants' collective vision for personal and national progress. Participants widely reported a shift in self-perception and identity due to the knowledge and skills acquired from the short courses.

One female beneficiary from Matabeleland North Regional Campus Certification said,

The time we encountered you (ZOU & Angel of Hope Foundation), our lives were transformed... Yes, transformed indeed. Situations in our lives shrouded the beauty and potential within us. You should have seen the excitement that flooded our faces, the giggles and chatters that became characteristics of us, as the young and elderly met in our different corridors heading for school (In Shona, vana gogo, netwisikana vachimhanyira kuchikoro). It was like a long barren woman who had just discovered that for the first time missed her menses. You resurrected some dying passions. You resurrected dreams that had long faded and ZOU like a giant eagle taking care of orphaned weak nestlings, took us in and allowed us into classes. You carried us on your wings and here we are today. Thank you for remembering Matabeleland North Province. It is true that, if you educate a woman, you have educated a nation.... Thank you, We really appreciate what you have made us became. We are looking forward to more. Siyabonga!

Many felt empowered to confront past challenges, embrace new knowledge and skills embarking on more constructive paths. One participant, previously engaged in sex work to raise her two fatherless children, shared in Shona translated as,

I never thought I would one day share my story, fearing ridicule. But hearing how another single mother turned her life around through pot moulding it inspired me to build a better future.

Similarly, several narratives highlighted how initial scepticism turned into admiration during the course launches. One group of five family members recalled their initial expectations upon attending the short courses echoed this translated from Shona,

We had assumed to receive food hand-outs before the training. When that didn't happen, we almost decided to return home. However, there was a determined grandmother who had eagerly registered for several courses. It was her enthusiasm that inspired us to stay. This drove us to plan to do each a different course which we could combine later in a joint business venture.

Focus group participants expressed joy and pride in receiving university certificates, an achievement many had once deemed unreachable. One noted, "Today we return home as proud

certificate holders. ZOU has shown us that we too are vital contributors to national development.”

Most participants found the programme facilitators very serious and described the programme as well structured too. They suggestively proclaimed, ‘It felt like going back to school with focused lessons, demonstrations and even homework. It wasn’t just symbolic. It was real learning.’

Those who took courses in Law and Counselling found relief in gaining tools to navigate personal and legal challenges. A group from correctional services saw the courses as both redemptive and transformative,

We are very happy to leave this place with certificates, this has touched us, and we feel it represents new beginnings. These courses gave us hope to rebuild our lives after incarceration.

Most participants from correctional services reflected,

We urge parents not to let emotions drive their actions. We regret reacting with violence to others. These courses helped us rebuild our identity and we aim to return to society as better persons.

Many expressed deep gratitude, feeling included and transformed. Some, after participating in certification events, described shaking hands with government officials as a once-unimaginable honour which was made possible by ZOU and its partner.

Regional campus coordinators viewed the short courses as essential for community development, although they noted the need for clearer role definitions between ZOU, local authorities and the national centre to prevent operational overlaps. ZOU ODeL students felt sidelined initially but strongly supported the programme’s objectives.

As ZOU students, we wanted to be involved from the planning stage. We come from these communities and understand their needs. Community outreach should involve us too as much as possible.

They emphasised the role of social innovation and engagement in improving curricula and called for better policy frameworks on community engagement. Staff and students alike agreed that community outreach must remain central to ZOU’s mission if sustainable development is to be achieved. Suggestions from most participants included conducting benchmarking surveys and self-audits to refine the integration of Heritage-Based Education 5.0 philosophy.

Persons with disabilities appreciated the inclusive approach of the short courses but expressed concern over the sustainability of the initiative. They appealed for continued collaboration and government support for such programmes. Some participants initially misinterpreted the initiative as politically motivated, but testimonies from previous trainees encouraged them to enrol, leading to transformative experiences. Groups from Masvingo and Manicaland, after completing the ECD course, discovered ways to repurpose local materials into marketable toys, while agriculture-focused participants across four provinces lauded ZOU’s potential to lead sustainable development. Most participants from agriculture short courses suggested, *ZOU must play a leading role in farming, fruits and vegetable seeds and seedlings selling so that communities buy them at affordable prices and play a leading role in such trades.*

Most participants recommended that agriculture innovation hubs be established at every regional campus, covering, education and crop production, organic inputs and packaging, fruit budding and wine production and herbal gardens, hatcheries and animal breeding and how to utilise available resources profitably for self and nation at large. Participants believed that the agriculture faculty could address most community needs and that ZOU, with government support, could help communities form cooperatives and shell companies, monitored through regional campuses. Participants consensually suggested the launch of a National Community Engagement Day for showcasing products, innovations and sharing and learn from each other. Beneficiaries of the programme spoke of multi-pronged life opportunities in their lives. Apart from benefiting from the attended short courses some faded life dreams were rekindled and in all its ten regional campuses, ZOU had a direct boost of its mainstream student numbers.

One participant said,

I am an upcoming entrepreneur doing multi-level marketing business. I started this business in 2017, but I was not working in a professional manner. In June 2022, I came across information that ZOU in partnership with Angel of Hope Foundation, were offering free courses in different areas of study. Being an entrepreneur, I opted to do the Business Management course. This was one of the wisest decisions I have ever made.

I learnt how to record my transactions, before this course, I could not tell if I was making profit or loss. I am now able to make short and long-term plans for my business, improving marketing skills and making business projections.

My encouragement to everyone is that people must do short courses offered at ZOU, the few days I attended the course have resulted in a lifetime change for me. My desire is to enrol for a diploma course and eventually a degree.

Cultural heritage and ICT groups emphasised monetising traditional skills through drama, music, toy-making and assistive devices. They envisioned operating mobile entertainment hubs, exchange programmes and offering traditional services at a fee. One group shared,

We're six youths training in cultural heritage, planning a mobile entertainment hub for schools and community events. This course gave us purpose and a path to self-employment.

Several participants enrolled in multiple courses including ECD, entrepreneurship and disability management planned to launch a rural child-care hub using a barter system involving cash crops like nuts which can later be used operate peanut butter trading or payment through whatever they have goats or chicken which are further turned meat cuts for selling. Entrepreneurship groups proposed that ZOU should support the creation of small enterprises across all provinces, acting as both a skills provider and sales facilitator in the form of shell companies.

The initiative fostered community collaboration and the emergence of social entrepreneurship networks. Many female and young participants gained leadership skills, while lecturers were praised for their humility and accessible teaching styles. Staff acknowledged the initiative's contribution to heritage-based community-led education and Zimbabwe's Vision 2030, especially regarding women's empowerment and inclusive growth. One recurring phrase summarised from participants' sentiment was summarised as, 'If we cannot do it ourselves, no one will. Development must start with us.'

The programme's inclusiveness was evidenced by its cutting across age, gender and ability, thus, was widely praised and participants supported the idea of building agricultural hubs and shell companies as foundational to development which leaves no one behind and promotes development into upper-middle-income status by 2030. Some participants proposed that ZOU should partner with the Forestry Commission to plant indigenous medicinal trees. Ideas included value-adding to root crops (for example, drying and powdering sweet potatoes) and preserving wild fruits for commercial use.

Cultural heritage faculty were encouraged to collaborate with industry partners to develop traditional clothing lines for all ages. They were also encouraged to preserve indigenous knowledge and practices through storytelling and performance, to promote intergenerational learning and cultural preservation. Participants proposed that the goat breeding initiatives and artificial insemination (AI) services from Gweru farm should be placed under the Social Innovation Unit for continued activities with communal farmers and SMEs.

Discussion

This section critically interprets how the collected data answered the research questions. It integrates voices from focus groups, face-to-face interviews and narrative responses to semi-structured guiding questions, all triangulated with relevant literature and theoretical frameworks. The study's conceptual alignment with multi-purpose frameworks such as, symbiotic transformation, ODeL philosophy and the reciprocity windmill model contributed significantly to the credibility, reliability and contextual richness of the findings.

Participants overwhelmingly affirmed the relevance and timeliness of ZOU's fee-free short courses. However, they concurrently noted a significant gap in ZOU's visibility and public understanding, especially considering its presence across all ten provinces. A recurring sentiment was that the institution's name was often confused with the more visible internet service provider, ZOL due to some similarities with the abbreviation and pronunciation too despite differences in niche and purpose. However, considering findings from participants, it remains critical for ZOU to improve its brand and marketing styles. As echoed in Mutswanga (2014), there is a pressing need for ZOU to refine and aggressively execute a marketing strategy that communicate its unique value proposition, particularly how its programmes promote self-development, economic empowerment and national transformation in line with heritage-based, community-led education principles. In support DHET (2013), propose that universities must function as accountable social actors leveraging their academic infrastructure to drive local and national development through responsive community engagement.

The partnership between ZOU and the Angel of Hope Foundation stands out as a model of how socially driven alliances can translate heritage-based, community-led education into practice. Participants emphasised that the short courses were both empowering and aspirational, since they equipped them with practical knowledge for personal development and national contribution. Participants perceived the short courses not merely as training events but as transformative engagements that awakened a development-oriented mindset. Notably, the Faculty of Agriculture emerged as a critical space where theory was transformed into practice, especially in areas like crop production, livestock management, heritage preservation and indigenous resource use. The courses helped participants identify local markets, appreciate the value of self-reliance and available resources and growth in confidence.

Participants also appreciated the calibre of educators involved, highlighting the impact of being taught by professors, doctors and lecturers. The formalisation of the certificates, complete with

institutional seals and signatures, further elevated their legitimacy, with anecdotal as training team moved from province to province it was evidenced that some participants began some entrepreneur services from the short course skills and knowledge which underscores their relevance which is a fulfilment to promoting development into upper-middle-income status by 2030. There was strong consensus that ZOU should deepen and expand its partnerships with like-minded organisations and create a Community Engagement Consortium to assess and respond to local needs systematically. The success of the partnership with the Angel of Hope Foundation, particularly among participants from correctional facilities demonstrated how inclusive education can promote rehabilitation and reintegration.

Some participants from the business and entrepreneurship short courses questioned ZOU's perceived openness and suggested that the fee-free short courses serve as a practical platform for reintroducing ZOU to its communities. Financial constraints were also highlighted. Participants sensed a lack of adequate budgeting for the social innovation engagement activities. There were calls for the government to periodically allocate funds within university budgets for community engagement, recognising these activities as vital to national development and not optional extras. Findings strongly advocate that ZOU revisit its marketing strategies and adopt a high-visibility, community-anchored approach. This involves embedding itself within the social and economic fabric of Zimbabwean communities and continuously adapting curricula based on grassroots feedback.

The study proposes that the Faculty of Agriculture be established as ZOU's institutional development arm. This faculty should be positioned at the centre of all community development initiatives, serving as the fulcrum through which other faculties express their practical value. Participants suggested that ZOU should align their work with real-world challenges, collaborating through the Faculty of Agriculture to run, shell companies for certified seed production and indigenous plant cultivation, breeding and livestock support hubs and soil conservation, agro-processing and environmental resilience programmes. The shell company model mirrors the University of Zambia (UNZA), where university-industry linkages have become sustainable engines of community transformation.

Most participants proposed that, ZOU must back its Community Engagement Policy, with an annual budget and clear mandates. This should include regular follow-ups to track how participants implement their newly acquired skills and how this data can refine both short courses and the broader ODeL curricula. As previously expressed by literature ZOU's innovation hubs should be heritage-based and tailored to diverse learner profile including those with limited formal education but with practical experience and aspirations. The study reinforced the necessity of reconceptualising social innovation engagement as a core developmental function of higher education institutions. Community-based training, when properly designed, can reignite self-reliance, restore cultural identity and unlock local resources for productive use. Importantly, ZOU must transcend traditional academic elitism and embrace a multidisciplinary model of university-community co-creation.

The reciprocity windmill model and the white ant epistemological framework underscore the interconnectedness of all faculties. Each faculty must act not in isolation but in alignment with the shared objective of creating productive, self-reliant and sustainable communities. Agriculture, as a practical and symbolic centre, offers the most direct route to achieving these goals. Findings also call for universities to contribute visibly and tangibly to community development, using student outputs as formative and summative assessment of social impact.

Heritage-Based Education 5.0 is not a theoretical ambition but a directive that demands visible, sustainable and locally driven outcomes.

Conclusion

ZOU's model operationalises, community-led Heritage-Based Education 5.0 by evolving from knowledge dissemination to co-creation, societal transformation and economic upliftment. It captures Dewey's democratic, experiential learning and Freire's critical pedagogy, fused with reciprocal frameworks from service-learning and civic engagement literature. The outcome is a pragmatic model, university as anchor institution, making engagement and social innovation central to its identity and contribution to Vision 2030.

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