

ADMINISTRATIVE AUTONOMY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

By

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Abstract

What informed the discourse in this paper is the disconcerting discovery that some governments of developing nations (of which Nigeria is one) are not acutely apprised of the enormous and important benefits of university autonomy. And, therefore, bereft of them also is the awareness that the building blocks for results and performance, the benchmark of accountability in tertiary institutions, are a measure of the form and level of autonomy granted such institutions. The situation has turned out so, as a result of the misconceptions over the term ‘autonomy’ its extension ‘administrative autonomy’ and, of course, the subsequent unhealthy actions built on them. Disturbed by the recurring damaging effects of this discovery, the researchers decided to beam the searchlight towards this direction. Guided by such questions inter alia as: what is administrative autonomy? What is the measure of accountability in education? The researchers, using the analytic approach in philosophy and focusing on the leading variables of the study, together with the subsequent discussions, made some findings. The findings, inter alia, revealed that most governments of our day fail to realize that demand for administrative autonomy cannot be a pretext for absolving themselves from their obligations to fund even their own tertiary education if they are eager to have a place of honour in the comity of developed nations, and that the failure or outright refusal to devolve development need projects/tasks to tertiary institutions cannot allow them to showcase their capabilities and results through task performance. The benchmark of accountability in such institutions is results and performance. Any determined effort to turn the tide around and, so being some redress in this regard must show cognizance to these facts.

Introduction

Education is globally reckoned with as a foremost instrument for driving national development. For any nation that has subscribed to this view in the quest to assume a place of pride in the comity of nations, its education system must move with the times.

In this post industrial age of civilization [otherwise the information age] a facilitator in this regard has come in the form of the extant information communication technology (ICT) with its driving force anchored on the world wide web (www) such that the entire world is now linked together and is rapidly moving towards a knowledge-based economy. And indeed, as if he envisaged this development, Francis Bacon (c. 1561 – 1625), a post medieval era English philosopher in his 1620 publication ‘Novum Organum’ hinted that ‘knowledge is power’.¹ This power resides in man – *homo sede scientia* – (the seat of knowledge) and its seat in man is the human mind.

It becomes thus pretty obvious that the human mind is a mine, a repository of a sort; and some special art is needed to dig into it for purposes of tapping, excavating, exploring, developing, activating and harnessing that wealth of the resources providence had therein laid, and the quality of the yield is, no doubt, a measure of the quality of the tool deployed for that purpose. In this regard, the education instrument is a critical tool. And surely in a globalized world, the quality of the resources any nation can set on the world table markets is a measure of the quality of its education infrastructure. Therefore, education is *per se* basic infrastructure. The font, custodian and transmitter of it all is higher education institution (HEI), otherwise tertiary education. This accounts for why it has become imperative for governments to engage in HEI enterprises; and more importantly so in order not to be left behind in the race for quality life for the citizenry as well as quality web metric presence in the information society characterized, as it were, by highly challenging and exacting competitive circumstances. Institutions set up for this purpose must be seen to be flexible enough to run, adapting to the direction of the gale unencumbered and devoid of any entanglements. This may be reason why Rene Descartes (c.1596 – 1650) a modern era French philosopher, scientist and mathematician, in his permutations and reflections on the theory of knowledge noted that in the search for knowledge, the mind is guided in an infallible manner through reasoning to an infallible knowledge detached even from the physical word.² For him, the process of cognition requires freedom from all external interference and control. This is saying in effect that for this purpose of fitting into the information age with its concomitant cutting edge technology, the ICT, such institutions need certain degree of autonomy.³ They need this in order to operate to satisfy the yearnings of the chain of stakeholders. Harboring or entertaining a view contrary to the above provokes an invitation to provide answer to the question of why the post industrial age has witnessed such unprecedented surge in proliferation of tertiary institutions. But then, what is autonomy, one may ask? This brings us head-on to the need for definitions and clarifications of terms and the assumptions in this discourse. But before this, it is good to make some clarification here: hereinafter, the terms ‘higher education institution’, ‘the university’ and ‘tertiary education/institution’ are used interchangeably.

What is Autonomy?

It is important to have a proper conceptualization of the term ‘autonomy’ as well as its extension and implications in order to ground the unfolding discourse. The word ‘autonomy’ has an etymological root with a history dating back to the medieval period (c.500 – 1500).

Etymologically viewed, coming from two Greek words ‘auto’ meaning self and ‘nomos’ standing for law or rule; read conjointly, it literally means the power of self governance or operations guided by law set by self. In essence, it means immunity in operations from external control. In reference to an educational institution such as a university, it connotes and stands for the freedom of the institution to procedurally govern itself guided by laws it made without interference from any quarters in matter of decision making, management of its finances and general governance. The picture above fits in well with and was the norm in, medieval period university institutions such as those in Bologna, Paris and Oxford.⁴ Then, the institutions themselves called the shot in every material particular. Accordingly, they determined the curricula programmes on offer, fees payable, staff recruitment and welfare. Institutions were sought after by prospecting students according to felt needs. Then, universities were sustained, run and managed by the institutions themselves with little or no interference from governments of the day be it ecclesiastical or secular. Their sustenance came from fees, donations, endowments and the goodwill of generous individuals. Being on their own, the issue of debate over autonomy never arose. This was well long before the second world war (WW2).

With the war over and leveraging on the insights gathered sequel to the war, accentuated by the need to join in the race to cater for the citizen’s welfare, nations found themselves forced to turn to the universities. This in itself called for huge financial outlay and so considered no longer a matter to be left in the care of the institutions alone. People’s welfare called for setting up of industries and agencies; personnel were needed to man them. The need for human capacity development to drive national development was quite acute. Being now involved in this regard, government interference began to feature and this ignited conflict in the management of institutions.⁵ Autonomy which before now was assumed and enjoyed unencumbered has become a source of conflict and a matter for debate. Interestingly, the vagaries in the constructions and conceptualizations of the construct pitched interested parties into camps.

The emergent views, no doubt, also provided some rich insights. Some viewed university autonomy as standing for ‘the freedom of an institution to run its own affairs without direction or influence from any level of government’.⁶ Considering the definition above too brief and lacking in some details, this may be reason why Siddikov, on his own, sets it out as referring to the institution’s ability to determine its development strategy, organizational system, personnel recruitment, educational research, financial management and economic independence in the implementation of selected types of activities following laid down national laws.⁷ In all fairness and for our purpose, this UNESCO delineation of autonomy captures the mood of this paper. Let us pause here again to get a proper conceptualization of the extension of the concept autonomy in the form of ‘administrative economy.’

What is Administrative Autonomy?

The purport of this adjectival phrase is quite implied in the attempt to define autonomy. All put together, with autonomy as the institutional equivalent of academic freedom and administration having to do with the planning, organization, coordination and control [directing] of human and material resources towards the attainment of predetermined objectives, this concept is to be seen as standing for autonomy in the day to day running and management of the affairs of an institution following laid down rules of engagement.⁹ Thus the university institution is just like any other institution with goals and resources purposefully for goals attainment. We shall pause again at this moment and seek to provide answers to some further guiding questions.

- (a) Where does the university as an educational institution stand in any nation's socio-economic ladder?
- (b) What is the rationale for the demand for autonomy for universities?
- (c) What consequential implications lie following the demand for autonomy?

Where does the university as an educational institution stand in any nation's socio-economic ladder?

It has never been in doubt that education, globally, is an instrument *par excellence* for the pursuit of national development and growth. At the apex of any nation's education sector is the university. This is better grasped in the context that the university stands as the font and creator of knowledge, its collator, custodian and transmitter. It is in place with that overall goal of assisting in the honing of the citizenry into analytic, constructively critical, independent minded individuals. From their doings, such individuals, because they can question and interrogate inherited assumptions and beliefs, stand as proof against sheepish mass conformism as well as proof of people liberated from the yoke of the past.¹⁰ Thus disposed, the people by themselves strive to work and earn for themselves such quality of life and welfare comparable with communities and nations across the borders. They see themselves no longer as people with arms outstretched to receive pittance and handouts. Let us look at the next question.

What is the rationale for the demand for autonomy for universities?

Being at the apex of any nation's education system, the university institution is not an institution that is set up overnight. It takes time and thought in planning. Wheresoever one is found, there have always been known some two major overriding causes: to be at the forefront in the nation's human capital development and the drive for national growth and development.¹¹ It is in such institutions that the best brains for that purpose reside. As rightly noted by Menzie cited in Lawal, the university is the research hub for development and innovations, a training school for the needs of professions, a liaison between the academician and the practical man, a training ground for leaders and the likes.¹² To him, it is unthinkable to get to hear that the government of a free nation should seek to tell its university what and how it should conduct itself.

Though separated in time and pace, Loscher¹³ commenting in this regard earlier remarked that the demand for autonomy is as a strategy to enable universities to be more efficient and effective

as it would allow them, on their own, to determine such issues as personnel recruitment, admission of students, curricula matters and methods of teaching. More importantly, it would offer them that latitude in operations to establish priorities for themselves and their growth. No less revealing in this regard is the view championed by Reale and Primee cited in Semyonov and Platonova¹⁴ urging that besides making the institutions more efficient and effective, the grant of administrative autonomy will pave the way for real time accountability, overcoming localism and promoting the merits of individuals and organizations. It is not overstressing the issue, looking back to the Cartesian period of modern philosophy when Rene Descartes (1596 – 1650) advocated for complete detachment in any involvement in the search for true knowledge because man ‘arrives at the truth by a process of continuous and uninterrupted action of the mind.’¹⁵ This is because the cognitive process requires freedom from all external interference. In juxtaposition, in the context of tertiary education, the university requires autonomy in order to be able to achieve the goals for which the stakeholders set it up in the first instance.

What consequential implications lie following the demand for autonomy?

What a puzzle it may present remarking that certain truth is not given to everybody that easily to grasp about this crave for autonomy for tertiary institutions. Yet this fact is known and consented to readily by positive actions even in climes hitherto rated as too autocratic and, so, impervious to any flash of light of insight from without. Wheresoever autonomy is known to have been granted and introduced, such institutions are known and seen to think and act independently and with a high sense of responsibility; and by extension, they are seen readying themselves for accountability, a scenario described as ‘thinking from the top’.¹⁶ Since autonomy implies freedom from external control in the academic and administrative matters, any institution that attains such level, by implication, sees itself as having entered into a contractual relationship with the stakeholders no matter how remotely placed along the line. In an atmosphere like this, the institution can now *de jure* exercise the powers to overhaul the curricula to suit the demand of the times and more importantly in the context of the labour market. Such curricular programme offers are now unarguably both students and labour centered. In this way, they ensure that the students are not just employable but are seen to be employed. This, on the one hand, is another form of marketing education.

On the other hand, besides the curricular programme offers being both student and labour oriented and given also that autonomy confers the right and power to decide on matters of admission, thinking with that sense of responsibility, the management sets for itself a benchmark for admission and the fees chargeable. This it does mindful that since the institution’s survival is also dependent on enrolment, it must show tact and reason by ensuring that admission is neither forced down nor the fees regime so exerting and repugnant as to deter or frustrate seekers of quality knowledge. In this way also, it ensures it stays in business and relevant.

Throwing more light on the implications of university autonomy especially when now that the institution has begun to see itself as into a pact with stakeholders coupled with the fact of the verifiable employability of the products, this is a pointer to the labour and market oriented

quality education received by the students. By extrapolation, this is a measure of the quality and competences of the corps of personnel helping to perform the magic even though from behind. These are indications of results showcasing performance as benchmark for measuring success and determining institutional rating.¹⁷

Yet, there is more in this regard. One observation worth noting down and underlining now is that, given the specializations in specific programmes and course offers in the institutions, such will awaken, catalyse and strengthen competition in cognate institutions and, so, form a basis for attracting students, extra-budgetary funds from investors (by way of endowments, projects, floating of scholarships and awards). This is all an outflow of success anchored on results and performance.¹⁸ Let us address yet another variable of our discourse: education accountability.

What is Accountability in Education?

It is a truism flowing from the law of finality in its thrust that everything that exists acts towards an end. In reference to an educational institution like the university, there is a purpose that informed it set up in the first instance. Consequent on that it is accountable to some persons be it natural or juristic. Being an ongoing concern that is not auto-operated, it is viewed as a trust institution which, at an appointed time and following some agreed modal indicators, is called upon to account obviously to the stakeholders.

As an institution, what is it usually called upon to account for, one may ask? It is no other than how effectively and efficiently, as a steward, it has managed the materials and resources placed under its care and control. No wonder, and rightly too, has accountability been defined simply as measuring the effectiveness of what one does.¹⁹ Viewing it further in the context of educational institution, it is seen as “an inquiry into the consequential benefits the resources made available have yielded.”²⁰ Nonetheless, invitation to account must have a focus. There must be a deliberate definition and delineation of the fronts. For instance, there must be clear-cut and specific goals, the strategy for their attainment and the measures which serve as indicators of delivery through performance.

Broadly viewed, university institutions *ab initio* have their goals well delineated *namely*: championing nation’s human capital development needs and her drive towards national development and growth.²¹ This may well explain why there is a tripod of causes for the engagement of higher education teaching personnel *namely*: research, teaching and community service. Together with all involved in any capacity operating within the four-walls of the institution, they constitute the academic community with rights and obligations. In extension they are all stakeholders in the trust institution – the university. But these are not the only stakeholders in the ongoing concern. In fact, the stakeholders are of two levels, internal and external.

While it may not appear worthwhile drawing a line among them, the fact stands that there are the councils/boards, administrators and faculty staff. There are the students and by extension the parents/guardians who are the sponsors. There are the teachers, the alumni, the funding bodies

and members of the public, all with stake and interest in the progress and performance of the institution.²² Even though the society is the ultimate beneficiary, all these stakeholders are seeking to draw one benefit or the other from the institution. There is always among these classes the interplay of the principles of expectation, duty and obligation.²³ There is expectation on the part of the beneficiaries, at least on the two prime causes for setting up the university – evidence of human capital development with the graduates at the front charting the course of social and community development. There is duty on the part of the personnel who are the trustees, and there is obligation on the part of whoever that set up the trust. Let us pause again to have a look, even if cursorily, at the socio-panoramic landscape of high education institutions in Nigeria in general with special focus, however, on federal-owned universities.

The socio-panoramic view of the University Landscape in Nigeria

At the present, it is a notorious fact that there are about 219 university institutions in Nigeria. Of these, 111 are private-owned, 59 are states and 49 are federal government owned, all riding on that crest of commitment to human capital development and the drive towards national development and growth.²⁴ Among these many lies a common demand: a crave for autonomy as a strategy for greater effectiveness and efficiency. And as the stress for accountability has shifted from compliance with legal stipulations to production of results, performance has become the benchmark for the rating of such institutions. Accordingly, reviewing the results of survey of Nigeria's federal universities in the web metrics ranking in the past five years (2017-2021), none has come within the first one thousand in the period. The University of Ibadan (UI) and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) managed to secure the 1172nd and 1775th position respectively.²⁵ And though there has occurred just recently an improvement in performance, of the number that made the top band of the first one thousand in 2023, indication is that there is neither regularity nor constancy in positions. For instance, while the University of Ibadan (UI) and the University of Lagos (UNILAG) made it to the first 401 – 500 band (what an improvement); the Bayero University, Kano and the Federal University Akure, from no where before, overtook University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) to come within the 1001 – 1200 band. The UNN and Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) came within the 1201 – 1500 band.²⁶ The rating was based on a quadripod of carefully calibrated performance indicators covering teaching, research, knowledge transfer and receptivity at the international arena. While the above is the state of the arts in the federal universities' web metrics ranking, the performance in laboratory rating is not cheering either. It is on record that as at 2011, not even one University laboratory in Nigeria made it within the first one thousand globally.²⁷ This is because gross infrastructure deficit was a common feature in all of them irrespective of status. Even out of the 61 that were assessed, some had their laboratory facilities serving also as lecture theatres. Notable too is that where there were workshops and simulation centres, they were dysfunctional because most of the equipment were either run down, vandalized or rotted away. The conjoint effect of this rot in the system made it virtually impossible for the institutions to deliver on their mandates. These, besides other limitations and grievances, have precipitated the renewed fight

for autonomy in the institutions, often culminating in strikes and closures. Yet, though worrisome, students have been graduating!

How many of such strikes and closures have occurred in the past five years, one may ask? It is not easy to set the figure down with accuracy. However, indication is that the union sheltering the higher education teaching personnel in universities – the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) – has since the current democratic dispensation in 1999 spent 1404 days on strike representing three years and ten months.²⁸ One direct effect of such strikes and closures is dislocations in the academic calendars, stagnation (if not outright derailing) of the students from their dreams of self actualization. For those who can afford it (and really how many can?) they seek for options in private and foreign universities. Report shows that tuition fees payment for Nigerians studying in the United Kingdom alone in 2020 amounted to \$423m (equivalent of ₦152bn)²⁹ and in the three months between December 2021 and February 2022 tuition fees abroad gulped as much as \$221m.³⁰ These sums as noted by Professor Gbajabiamila (the Vice Chancellor of Crescent University, Abeokuta) were more than the 5% budgetary allocation to education made by Nigeria, a free nation. For the past five years, the trend in Nigeria's budgetary allocation to education has been as follows: 7.4% in 2018; 7.5% in 2019; 6.7% in 2020; 5.6% in 2021 and 7.9% in 2022.³¹ These clearly are at variance even with the Dakar EFA Global Report recommendation of between 15% and 20% of nation's budget.³²

Discussion

In clear language, the tussle which the issue of administrative autonomy for universities has generated in recent times was never anticipated. This is because long before the Second World War, it was no issue of concern. In fact, autonomy for such level of institutions was *de jure*. But soon after, the tide began to change with governments' intervention especially when they became the funds providers. Why did autonomy for tertiary institutions become such a heated issue of debate and acrimony one may ask?

The situation assumed this dimension because of misconceptions. While the agitation for it in institutions was as a strategy for greater efficiency and effectiveness, accountability, overcoming localism and promoting individual and organization's merits³³, governments of nations, especially in developing nations, construed it all in terms of financial autonomy and legalism, neither results nor performance counted for anything.³⁴ This is as in the Nigerian paradigm, following the autonomy law the government of the day interpreted it to centre on finance but the ASUU was emphatic on internal democracy and procedural self-governance in the University as well as adequate funding to cater for staff and infrastructure development. This is just a pointer to the diversity in the misconceptions about autonomy. Determined to give vent to such misconceptions, using such proxy institutions like JAMB, the NUC and the Councils, governments have gone ahead, over the years, to practically erode and strip the universities of the critical elements of autonomy. As these proxy institutions have virtually taken over such matters as admission, accreditation of programmes and disbursement of funds relative to programmes, the universities are expected to work under their strict control. Even the

appointment of the Vice Chancellors became the prerogative of Councils the membership of which especially the external members, comprises people who ordinarily (because they have no experience of the University four walls) should have nothing doing with shaping the destiny of such institutions.³⁵ Such people being political appointees, see such appointments as further opportunity to secure contracts, appointments and promotion for their dependents and cronies.³⁶ With this calibre of people in the governance of the universities, this has paved the way for lacklustre performance as it is capable of diminishing the accountability profile of institutions. How can this come about, one may ask?

Being political appointees (as already noted), they see their appointments as reward for political support (in potency or in act). Upon assumption of roles, certain irregularities are bound to start showing up. As for instance, when there is power in the way, there should be expected such things as capture, exclusion and even clientelism; and subsequently commitment to the causes for setting up the institutions will be hamstrung. This is because with the gale of capture blowing through and within, seemingly uncontrollable, there will come a feeling of exclusion and lack of job satisfaction (if not outright frustration) because the incentives to cooperate are already eroded. Not long, it will become pretty obvious that accountability has been put up for sale and the inevitability of brain drain stares all on the face.³⁷

Whereas when and where administrative autonomy is the norm, the university begins to see itself as no longer working to attain compliance with regulations from outside but rather working to meet, through performance and results, the expectations in the contractual arrangements and pact with both the students and the labour market in particular and ultimately the society. Cognizant of the demands in the general workforce and labour industry, measures are taken to make curricula exactly students and workplace centred while at the same time, through its admission policy and fees regime, they ensure that they keep the gates open, neither forcing down admissions nor making it difficult for them to remain functioning and in business.³⁸

All things put together, because the curricula packages on offer are client and labour centric, verifiably meeting the workplace demand, this becomes a pointer to the quality of education and the skills being honed in the institution. In extrapolation, this serves as both a mirror and a measure of the quality and competence of the personnel behind the scene performing the magic. This is accountability through results using the performance benchmark. This, apart from robbing off well on the institution, is indicative of the specializations going on within and certainly a factor in institutional rating. Reckoning with all this will no doubt provoke, catalyze and strengthen competition in cognate institutions and so be a basis for attracting more clients, extra-budgetary funds from investors by way of contracts, projects, endowments and the likes in different forms. Illustration comes from some Russian universities, specifically those in the Southern and Siberia. These were the first to be granted autonomy. Like the other institutions, they receive their funding but not by way of estimate. It is rather in form of grants to them dependent on the tasks assigned to be solved by the institutions.³⁹ This marks a clear departure from what is happening in the context of Nigerian universities.

In Nigeria, autonomy is sought to be determined by government from outside. And given the incessant non performance of own part in agreements, tertiary institutions are continually drawn into strikes, not infrequently culminating in closures (sometimes protracted) and subsequently triggering off search for options in foreign universities, leading inevitably to enforced capital flights. Is it not worrisome, one may ask, that a country like Nigeria designated the world poverty capital should watch and see her citizens spend as much as \$221m as tuition fees in foreign universities within a space of three months⁴⁰ A simple patriotic and intelligent reflection will readily impel the government of the day to simply augment this much with a marginal figure to bring it up to the 15 – 20% recommendation of EFA Global Report signed, sealed and delivered in Dakar. As a developing nation, the stakes are high and multi-pronged for Nigeria. Nothing short of autonomy for the universities covering such area as academic freedom substantive independence and procedural self-governance which serve as ground for accountability will do.⁴¹ Indeed, accountability in education is by choice. Lending its weight in this regard, the UNESCO has urged that “member states are under an obligation to protect higher education institutions from threats to their autonomy coming from any source”.⁴²

Implications arising from the Study

The following conclusions have become inevitable consequent on the varied findings and subsequent discussions:

The demand for administrative autonomy, besides serving the purpose of securing internal democracy and procedural self-governance, is a strategy for greater efficiency and effectiveness in tertiary institutions.

Autonomy granted and introduced lays that solid foundation for accountability because then the institutions see themselves in contractual relationships with clients because now preoccupied with the need to make their curricula programme packages client and labour centric, products and service marketable.

Devolving tasks and projects to institutions and the subsequent delivery on these serves as gateway to attracting more scholars, extra-budgetary funds, endowments and awards. What is more, autonomy leading to and exemplified in accountability through results and performance, by extrapolation, catalyses, sustains and strengthens competition in cognate institutions. What did it take ASUU to produce to UTAS (University Transparency and Accountability System) template for personnel emolument.

Demand for autonomy cannot serve as a pretext for governments to absolve themselves from providing needed funds for at least staff and infrastructure development.

Recommendations

In the light of the foregoing discussions and conclusions therefrom, the researchers recommend as follows:

Government of free nations such as Nigeria should demonstrate a favourable pre-possession of the mind and stop forthwith the prevarications over the demands for real time autonomy for tertiary education.

As autonomy lays the solid foundation for accountability by getting the institutions and stakeholders into contractual relationships with duties and obligations exemplified also in performance, governments should cultivate the practice of devolving tasks/assignments, contracts and projects to tertiary institutions.

With a grant of autonomy to institutions, they should begin to see such not just for critical adaptation to local labour demands but also for driving their reach further through breakthroughs, patents and, so, enhance the receptivity of their products and services as well as ranking at the international arena. By so doing they provoke, stimulate and strengthen competition in cognate institutions.

Governments of free nations should no longer view the demand for autonomy in finance management and procedural self-governance as flimsy and, therefore, a pretext for absolving themselves from their obligations to fund tertiary education in so far forth as staff welfare and infrastructure development matters are concerned. The governments of free nations should learn to prioritize tertiary education clothed with autonomy in preference to playing politics of grandstanding and heckling in order to give real development a chance if it hopes to command a place of honour in the comity of nations to say the least.

In conclusion, continuing along the line of wrong construction of university autonomy and its extension administrative autonomy can hardly get any nation o leverage on the cutting-edge of the ever-expanding diverse ramifications of the information age or place its universities on course to a place of reckon in the web metric ranking independently.

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