

## The internationalization of higher education: overview and the Brazilian experience

*Internacionalização da Educação Superior: visão geral e experiência brasileira*

*Internacionalización de la Educación Superior: visión general y experiencia brasileña*

### Interview: Rossana Valéria de Souza e Silva

Ana Sheila Fernandes Costa<sup>1</sup>  
University of Brasília

Abdeljalil Akkari<sup>2</sup>  
University of Geneva

Joiciane Aparecida de Souza<sup>3</sup>  
Haute Ecole Francisco Ferrer

	<p>PhD in Education, State University of Campinas - UNICAMP (1997). Completed her post-doctorate internship in Educational Sciences at Université Paris 8, France (2002). She is a retired professor from the University of Brasília - UnB. Since 2008, she has been the Executive Director of the Brazilian Universities International Cooperation Group - GCUB. She is the Former President of the Governing Board of the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean - UNESCO-IESALC. She is a Visiting Professor in the Ethics Program at the Universidad del Azuay (Ecuador) and the Red Universitaria y Ciudadana de Ética y Bioética - RUCEB (Ecuador). She was a consultant for the Organization of American States - OAS, in the Department of Human Development, Education and Employment. She has extensive experience as a coordinator of international programs and courses for professors, researchers, and undergraduate and graduate students. E-mail: <a href="mailto:rossana@gcub.org.br">rossana@gcub.org.br</a>.</p>
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<sup>1</sup> PhD in Educational Sciences. University of Brasília (UnB), Brasília, Federal District, (DF) Brazil. E-mail: [anasheila@unb.br](mailto:anasheila@unb.br); Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/3724711272294120>; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3714-0579>.

<sup>2</sup> PhD in Educational Sciences. University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland. E-mail: [abdeljalil.akkari@unige.ch](mailto:abdeljalil.akkari@unige.ch); ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4396-2635>.

<sup>3</sup> PhD in Educational Sciences. Haute Ecole Francisco Ferrer, Brussels, Belgium. E-mail : [joiciane.desouza@he-ferrer.eu](mailto:joiciane.desouza@he-ferrer.eu); ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0455-1155>.

**Abstract:** In the present interview, Prof. Dr. Rossana Valéria de Souza e Silva narrates her trajectory with international cooperation management and shares experiences lived in the Internationalization of Higher Education, in almost 25 years of experience/activity. Her professional career, which coincides with a period when the implementation of the internationalization of Higher Education in Brazil was intensified, reveals the important role played in actions undertaken at national and institutional public policy levels. Finally, our interviewee highlights the challenges, changes and advances observed in international university cooperation and indicated possible paths for its increase and consolidation.

**Keywords:** Internationalization of Higher Education; International cooperation management; Public Policies; Institutional Policies.

**Resumo:** Em entrevista, a Profa. Dra. Rossana Valéria de Souza e Silva narra sua trajetória na gestão da cooperação internacional e compartilha experiências vivenciadas na Internacionalização da Educação Superior, em quase 25 anos de atuação. Seu percurso profissional, que coincide com o período de intensificação da implementação da internacionalização da Educação Superior no Brasil, revela o importante papel desempenhado em ações empreendidas em níveis de políticas públicas nacionais e institucionais. Por fim, nossa entrevistada ressalta os desafios, as mudanças e avanços observados na cooperação.

**Palavras-chave:** Internacionalização da Educação Superior; Gestão da cooperação internacional; Políticas Públicas; Política Institucionais.

**Resumen:** En entrevista, la Prof. Dra. Rossana Valéria de Souza e Silva narra su trayectoria en la gestión de la cooperación internacional y comparte sus experiencias en la Internacionalización de la Educación Superior, en casi 25 años de experiencia. Su carrera profesional, que coincide con el período de intensificación de la implementación de la internacionalización de la Educación Superior en Brasil, revela el importante papel desempeñado en las acciones emprendidas a nivel de políticas públicas nacionales e institucionales. Finalmente, nuestra entrevistada destaca los desafíos, cambios y avances observados en la cooperación universitaria internacional y señala posibles caminos para su incremento y consolidación.

**Palabras clave:** Internacionalización de la Educación Superior; Gestión de la cooperación internacional; Políticas Públicas; Políticas Institucionales.

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**REPOD:** Tell us about your journey in the management of university international cooperation.

**Rossana Valéria de Souza e Silva:** Formally, my journey in the management of international cooperation began at the Federal University of Uberlândia (UFU) in the early 2000s. During this period, we created the International Relations Office of UFU – ASDRI. I worked in this sector as an International Relations Advisor (ARI) until the end of 2008.

Prior to ASDRI, UFU already had experience in international cooperation, but it was more focused on cooperation with France and in the engineering fields. The emergence of

ASDRI led to the definition of an internationalization policy for the institution; the expansion of international cooperation to various countries across different continents and to all areas of knowledge; the strengthening of UFU's participation in national internationalization programs, such as PEC-G and PEC-PG; and an increase in the mobility of undergraduate students, graduate students, professors, and researchers. Furthermore, important international events were held during this period. It can be said that it was from this period onwards that different sectors of UFU became more aware of and involved in the dynamics related to university international cooperation.

Also, during the period in which I served as ARI at UFU, I was also a member of CRIA, the International Relations Committee of the National Association of Heads of Higher Education Institutions – ANDIFES. As a member of CRIA, in 2008, I was appointed by the ANDIFES Board to work on the project to create the Association which was initially called the Coimbra Group of Brazilian Universities – GCUB.

GCUB was created in Brasília on October 29, 2008, as an Association of Rectors, with the primary purpose of promoting and strengthening the internationalization of its member universities through cooperation with institutions located on all continents.

The first elected Board of GCUB, at the end of 2008, invited me to serve as Executive Secretary of the Association. As a result, I moved to Brasília, and some years later, I became Executive Director of GCUB.

The name Grupo Coimbra de Universidades Brasileiras (Coimbra Group of Brazilian Universities) was changed, on October 30, 2020, to Grupo de Cooperação Internacional de Universidades Brasileiras (Group of International Cooperation of Brazilian Universities). However, the acronym remained the same.

During my time at GCUB, I have had several experiences that I believe have contributed and continue to contribute to the management of the Association's international cooperation. I can mention a few: I was a member of the committee of experts of the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie-AUF; a member and then president of the Board of Directors of UNESCO/IESALC; I participated in the Board of Directors of the Forum for Higher Education Management of Portuguese-speaking countries and regions - FORGES; and I have participated for several years on the Executive Council of the Union of Universities for Latin America and the Caribbean - UDUALC. I am also part of the University and Citizen Network of Ethics and Bioethics - RUCEB (Ecuador).

**REPOD: How has the internationalization of Higher Education influenced the daily lives of universities in recent years?**

**Rossana Valéria de Souza e Silva:** International cooperation has become essential for the development and strengthening of universities in recent times. Small and large universities, located in countries across all five continents, recognize the value of international cooperation. This cooperation is carried out both with other universities, as well as with international networks and associations, research institutions, or sectors related to culture, technology, and innovation.

Particularly in the last three decades, it has become imperative for all higher education institutions, especially universities, to cooperate with institutions in other countries to learn about their experiences and their higher education and research systems. Furthermore, it's important to understand how different cultures have organized and developed themselves; to analyze the socioeconomic and cultural differences pertaining to countries; and to exchange experiences related to research and innovation. Providing proficiency in other languages has also been a purpose of international cooperation in higher education.

It is reasonable to state that no university in the world is so strong that it has nothing to learn from another. Similarly, there is no university that has nothing to teach another institution. This is perhaps one of the most important principles to consider in international university cooperation.

The changes that have occurred in the global context since the second half of the 20th century have led to significant changes in Higher Education, with relevant impacts on public education policies, university teaching models, research, and the relationship between universities and society.

A mobilidade internacional de estudantes, tanto de graduação quanto de pós-graduação, tornou-se nas últimas três décadas uma das características mais marcantes da cooperação universitária internacional e trouxe impactos muito positivos para o ensino superior.

One of the main impacts is related to greater cultural diversity in classrooms. Since the second half of the last decade of the 20th century, there has been a significant increase in the number of students from different continents and cultures participating in international mobility programs. In this context, discussions about respect for diversity and sociocultural differences gain prominence.

Another important impact related to international cooperation concerns changes in the academic trajectory of undergraduate and graduate students and in curriculum models. While traditional curriculum models were organized into consecutive courses, completed at the same institution, over four, five, or even six years of study, the new models allow for different pathways involving one or more foreign institutions.

In these new formats, an undergraduate student can begin their course at their home institution, undertake studies at two or three other institutions, and receive a diploma

signed by the authorities of three or four universities, which has become known as a “joint degree.” In addition, there is the “double degree” obtained from studies conducted at the home institution and at a partner institution.

Similarly, in graduate programs, it has become common and desirable for master’s and doctoral students to carry out part of their studies and develop part of their research at a foreign institution. Both international internships and co-supervision of theses, with or without obtaining a dual degree, have become part of the routine of graduate courses, and, especially, to indicate the level of internationalization of their courses and institutions.

The ability to attract students from other countries has become an important indicator of universities’ degree of internationalization and a key element for the institution’s presence in international rankings. Another significant impact caused by international university cooperation in undergraduate and graduate education is related to language proficiency requirements. In addition to the importance of English language proficiency, discussions centered on the competencies of plurilingualism and multilingualism are becoming increasingly prominent.

The intensification of international university cooperation brings significant changes and produces very positive impacts on the daily life of institutions. A more welcoming university, internationally integrated with other institutions, with more flexible teaching models, and that allows for broader multicultural coexistence, is certainly desirable. However, international university cooperation is also capable of generating negative impacts, since, depending on the institution’s internationalization policy, it can intensify inequalities and increase the distance between those equipped to have international experiences and those who, for various reasons, have limitations, especially socioeconomic ones. The widening of differences will be expressed, for example, but not only, in the value that the job market will assign to the diploma of those who had and those who did not have an international experience in their university career.

Finally, international university cooperation also impacts the training of faculty within institutions. This is expressed both in prioritizing the hiring of professors who possess international experience and speak more than one language, and in the mobility of visiting professors from different countries and cultures. In the international context, attracting foreign professors to serve as visiting professors is as important as the international mobility of undergraduate and graduate students.

**REPOD: Specifically addressing the actions developed to materialize international university cooperation, what changes observed in recent years have contributed to its strengthening and consolidation within Brazilian Higher Education Institutions (HEI)?**

**Rossana Valéria de Souza e Silva:** One of the main changes observed in recent years, regarding the strengthening of international university cooperation, is the incorporation of these institutions into university associations or networks.

Some advantages of networking are related to the capacity to engage with many institutions, whether they are from the same country or from different countries and continents. Furthermore, networks enhance the numbers of academic mobility, of students, professors, and researchers. Networks and associations also enable relevant discussions about Higher Education and university internationalization policies. These organizations also possess the technical and operational capacity to develop different joint strategies for mobilization and mobility of the academic community, through the promotion of events, courses, international missions, and publications.

A successful example of networking in Brazil is the Group of International Cooperation of Brazilian Universities – GCUB. This Association currently brings together 101 Higher Education institutions, 95 Brazilian and six foreign. GCUB's primary purpose is the internationalization of its member universities, with institutions located on five continents. Among its international partners are other networks and associations, such as UDUALC, AUF, ANUIES, and ASCUN; international organizations, such as UNESCO, OAS, OSC, and PAHO; cultural centers; governmental bodies; and universities located in different parts of the world.

Through mobility programs, GCUB annually enables the exchange of knowledge and cultural experiences for thousands of undergraduate, graduate, professors, and researchers. Communication and collaboration among networks and associations have also proven beneficial for the internationalization of their member institutions, especially by reducing the time and costs for carrying out actions.

Another important change observed in recent years is related to virtual international university cooperation. Especially after the Covid-19 Pandemic, many activities, previously carried out primarily in person, adopted the virtual format. This includes qualification and defense panels for master's and doctoral degrees. Currently, it is common to have panels in a hybrid or fully virtual format, with external members from other countries.

**REPOD: Throughout these several years of activity, what internationalization experiences do you consider most successful? What characterizes these experiences?**

**Rossana Valéria de Souza e Silva:** When discussing successful internationalization experiences in Brazil, we cannot fail to mention the Science Without Borders Program (CsF), created by the federal government in 2011, during the administration of President Dilma Rousseff. As is well known, the Program's initial goal was to distribute 101,000 scholarships between 2011 and 2015. The purpose was to encourage academic training abroad.

It is a fact that the CsF presented several limitations, such as: failures in the monitoring system of undergraduate students' study programs; the lack of a more rigorous analysis or prior preparation in languages, in order to provide more support for student success; the absence of a system for monitoring students abroad; and, mainly, the program's little or no inclusive character. However, the CsF managed to place Brazil's Higher Education and its internationalization purpose in the international debate and scenario. Regardless of the size of the country or the continent in which it was located, everyone knew, debated, and, if they were not part of the program, would like to be.

The program was terminated in 2017, during the administration of interim President Michel Temer, without a rigorous and comprehensive evaluation by the federal government. In particular, there was no assessment of its impact, results obtained, negative aspects, and positive aspects. Furthermore, nothing was proposed to replace the program. Even before the Science Without Borders Program, I would like to highlight the International Undergraduate Program - PLI as a successful experience. The PLI was a program created by GCUB and developed with the support of the Ministry of Education, specifically the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel - CAPES. It was a sandwich undergraduate program with dual degrees aimed at students in undergraduate courses in the areas of: Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics, Biology, Arts, Literature, and Physical Education. The registration of projects, done on the CAPES platform, was institutional.

The purpose of the PLI was to strengthen undergraduate degrees by giving students the opportunity to carry out part of their studies in renowned institutions abroad. Priority was given to students who had studied at least two years of high school in public schools.

The PLI sent more than 250 students abroad per year. Its initial, innovative project stipulated that three professors responsible for the institutional project approved by CAPES prepare the students before leaving Brazil, during their stay abroad, and reintegrate them into their home institution after returning to Brazil.

The initial partnership for sending students was established with the University of Coimbra, later extending to other Portuguese universities. Subsequently, a small group of French

institutions began to receive students. However, at this stage, important characteristics of the program's social inclusion nature had been modified, and the GCUB, despite being the program's creator, no longer participated in its management and decisions. Despite the program's social relevance, the PLI (International Language Program) was discontinued by CAPES (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel) after the launch of the Science Without Borders Program. This resulted in the loss of the opportunity to provide international training to students who had and have the fewest resources to participate in mobility programs outside of Brazil. This is because, as we know, undergraduate programs concentrate many students from families with low purchasing power. On numerous occasions, I have seen them recount all the difficulties they faced in entering Higher Education and participating in this international program.

In another area, regarding programs specifically developed by networks or associations of universities, I cite the successful experience of the Brazil Scholarship Program, created by the Group of International Cooperation of Brazilian Universities (GCUB), and implemented through a strong and important partnership with the Organization of American States (OAS), with the support of the Division of Educational Themes of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil (DCE/MRE) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO).

The Brazil Scholarships Program began in 2011. Its primary objective was to train qualified master's and doctoral students from the Americas, particularly from the OAS member countries. Over eleven editions, the universities associated with the GCUB annually offered an average of 500 scholarships, at the same rates received by Brazilian students pursuing master's and doctoral degrees in Brazil. During these eleven years, more than 4,500 scholarships were offered in all fields of knowledge to students from over 30 countries across the continent. The OAS, in turn, provided a subsidy of US\$1,200.00 to the top 150 ranked students.

The success of the Brazil Scholarships Program lay in its ability to unite efforts, to work in partnership with important international organizations, such as the OAS, PAHO, Brazilian universities, and to continuously have the support of the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRE-Brasil), both through the DCE and the Permanent Mission of Brazil to the OAS. Furthermore, the program had a very innovative character, for example: a) By creating the positions of institutional coordinators and vice-coordinators, PhD professors responsible for supporting students in their respective institutions and acting as focal points in the relationship between the GCUB, the OAS, other partners and supporters, and Brazilian universities; b) by enabling students to enter universities without Portuguese proficiency, but requiring them to present a proficiency certificate before defending their dissertation or thesis; c) by demonstrating the importance of the internalization of internationalization, since students were distributed

among universities located in capitals and the interior, large, medium, and small institutions, old, new, and very new institutions, moving away from the bias of internationalization concentrated in large centers; and, d) by being based on the principles of social inclusion, considering, in addition to merit assessed exclusively by the universities, the HDI of the students' countries previously approved by the institutions.

It was the success of the Brazil Scholarship Program that led GCUB to expand this experience by creating the GCUB-Mob Program in 2022. This program enables Brazilian universities to receive students from all five continents to pursue their master's or doctoral studies. GCUB-Mob is carried out in partnership and with the support of various institutions such as: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil (MRE); the Organization of American States (OAS); the Organization for South-South Cooperation (OSC); the National Council of State Funding Agencies (CONFAP); the Union of Universities of Latin America and the Caribbean (UDUALC); the UNESCO Commission in Brazil, and the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF).

In the first two editions of GCUB-Mob, nearly 10,000 applications were received from candidates from over 110 countries, located across five continents. Also noteworthy is the participation of universities associated with GCUB: more than 60 universities offered, in the first two editions of the program, over 2000 monthly scholarships for students to pursue their Master's (two years) or Doctoral (three or four years) studies in Brazil. Furthermore, various partner institutions support students with installation allowances, international insurance, and/or airfare. The objective is to try to ensure that students do not have to interrupt their studies in Brazil due to a lack of financial resources. This is because GCUB-Mob is based on the same previously stated principles as the Programa Bolsas Brasil [Brazil Scholarship Program]. The management of the Programa Bolsas Brasil and GCUB-Mob programs creates a new dynamic in the internationalization of higher education in Brazil, as a very large number of people are involved: the GCUB team in Brasília; professors from graduate programs; advisors/pro-rectors/directors/coordinators of international relations; pro-rectors of graduate studies; and rectors. This management also involves all national and international partners of the program.

GCUB-Mob alters the landscape of graduate studies and the internationalization of Brazilian universities by enabling students from very different and distant countries to pursue their graduate studies in Brazil. The program contributes to multiculturalism within graduate education and to learning respect for human diversity.



**REPOD:** A concern expressed over the past few years among governments and universities in the region has been the increase in university cooperation through the creation of internationalization plans, projects, and programs. Tell us about your experience in South-South internationalization initiatives, specifically with Brazil. How can we expand and strengthen collaboration between countries of the Global South?

**Rossana Valéria de Souza e Silva:** My experiences in South-South internationalization initiatives began with my work as International Relations Advisor at UFU (Federal University of Uberlândia). At that time, I tried to show the UFU academic community that internationalization should involve all continents, and I emphasized, on several occasions, especially in meetings of the higher councils, the importance of South-South cooperation. In this regard, during the period I directed ASDRI (Advisory Office for International and Interinstitutional Relations), I participated in meetings at the Ministry of Education aimed at creating mobility programs within the scope of Mercosur, including the MARCA program. Furthermore, it was during this period, in the mid-2000s, that I began a strong and lasting relationship with Cuba, which continues to this day. I led the delegation of Brazilian university rectors to Cuba and served as the focal point between the Ministry of Higher Education of Cuba and Brazilian institutions for the First Brazil-Cuba Rectors' Meeting. Subsequently, I organized the mobility of a small group of UFU Law students to Cuba, and we received a Cuban student who, in addition to pursuing her studies within the scope of mobility, completed an internship at COPEV (Dean of Extension, Culture, and Student Affairs). With the important and constant support of the UFU's Rectory, we had the opportunity to send a professor to Bolivia and strengthened cooperation with Mexican universities. We also reintroduced UFU to the Undergraduate Student Exchange Program - PEC-G and the Postgraduate Student Exchange Program - PEC-PG.

Despite the numbers being minimal, the political significance of these actions was significant, as it broke taboos and attempted to deconstruct the idea that international cooperation is solely carried out with large institutions from developed countries. These small, yet significant actions, attempted to show the academic community that international cooperation should be broad, open, and conducted without prejudice. Furthermore, it emphasized the importance of regional strengthening through South-South cooperation.

Subsequently, while working at GCUB, I had the opportunity to create and manage several other programs focused on South-South cooperation. I will briefly mention four of them. The first is the Brazil-Mexico International Mobility Program - BRAMEX, developed between GCUB and the National Association of Universities of Mexico - ANUIES, with the support of the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs - MRE-Brazil and the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs of Mexico - SER.

In its first nine editions, BRAMEX exchanged more than one thousand undergraduate students from Brazil and Mexico. In 2023, the program was expanded and exchanged undergraduate students, graduate students, professors, and researchers. The host universities provide accommodation and food for the mobility participants.

The second program is the Brazil-Colombia International Mobility Program - BRACOL. To date, BRACOL is restricted to the mobility of undergraduate students and is developed in the same format as BRAMEX. BRACOL is in its 11th edition and has already enabled the exchange of more than 1600 students from Brazil and Colombia.

The third is ProAfri, the Brazil-Africa Higher Education Teacher Training Program, promoted by GCUB in partnership with the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Technology and Professional Training of Mozambique, with the support of the MRE-Brazil. The main objective of ProAfri is to enable teachers already working in Higher Education in African countries to obtain their master's and doctoral degrees at Brazilian universities and qualify to work in their countries. The first three editions of the program were restricted to Mozambique and benefited almost 200 teachers. The universities associated with GCUB offer African teachers monthly scholarships, at the same values received by Brazilian students.

The fourth is the Higher Education Teacher Training Program of Latin America and the Caribbean - PROLAC. The program's main objective is to increase the number of masters and doctors in the region, with a view to improving Higher Education. Created by GCUB, PROLAC is developed in partnership with strong associations and councils of rectors of universities in the region: UDUALC, ANUIES, ASCUM and CSUCA. The universities of these institutions offer full or partial scholarships for teachers, distributed across the different countries of the region. More than 900 places, with partial or full scholarships, have been offered by the universities that are part of PROLAC.

In addition to these four programs, I highlight the Brazil Scholarship Program, whose information has already been mentioned in the answer to the previous question.

In recent decades, I have participated in various forums discussing the importance of South-South cooperation, both promoted by governmental and non-governmental organizations. I understand that the expansion and strengthening of South-South cooperation, in order to be more effective, would require more assertive policies from the countries in the region that consider the importance of regional strengthening and integration. South-South international university cooperation is just one part, albeit a very important part, of this broader context.

**REPOD: Finally, what experiences have contributed most incisively to the democratization of internationalization actions and practices in Higher Education in Brazil?**

**Rossana Valéria de Souza e Silva:** I believe that there are no incisive actions for the democratization of the internationalization of Higher Education in Brazil. Firstly, because there is no national policy for the internationalization of Higher Education. What we have, so far, are specific actions and programs, with little or no democratic character.

Let's consider the issue of languages: approximately 1% of the Brazilian population is fluent in English, and this percentage is reflected in Higher Education institutions. Furthermore, despite being surrounded by Spanish-speaking countries, the number of Brazilians fluent in that language is minimal. This is because, in Brazil, there has never been a strong national policy for serious language teaching in Basic Education. What prevails is make-believe: English classes, for example, are included in the school curriculum, with 50 minutes of class, at most twice a week. Result: students complete Basic Education without minimal communication skills in that language.

However, there is always another path for those who can afford to access it: more economically advantaged families enroll their children in good private English or other language schools, take international trips, and often send them to study abroad for a period. These are the young people who, upon entering university, will be able to participate in international mobility programs. Not only because they master one or more languages, but because they can afford the costs of yet another international experience, this time offered by the university.

Furthermore, there isn't a national program of full scholarships for undergraduate students, much less a program that combines studies abroad with prior preparation in the language of the country to be visited. Conclusion: students from disadvantaged families do not participate in these international experiences, either because they do not master other languages, or because they cannot afford them, or both. Unfortunately, professors and graduate students are also affected by this exclusionary context.

We lack a national internationalization policy for Higher Education, designed based on democratic and inclusive principles that benefit the entire university community. The internationalization we currently have is not democratic and is extremely exclusionary.

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