Factors in vocational education policy development: Modern apprenticeships, a case study

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Factors in vocational education policy development: Modern Apprenticeships, a case study

Stephen Billett, Griffith University


Abstract

This paper delineates factors influencing the development of policy for vocational education and training (VET), by identifying similarities and differences between policy in the United Kingdom and Australia. Although framed by the same model of economic orthodoxy, significant differences emerge in policy orientation and implementation which are sourced in political and ideological factors founded within the historical and institutional bases of these countries. These differences are of greater magnitude than is apparent from the adoption of common initiatives such as competency standards and industry leadership in both countries. Having overviewed these differences, the case of Modern Apprenticeships being implemented in the United Kingdom is advanced to illustrate further these factors and their consequences for practice within VET. This is undertaken by comparing that initiative to models of entry-level training which have been enacted here. The theoretical basis for this discussion is found in an analysis of policy from an interrelated three part framework advanced by Ball (1990) which comprises economic, political and ideological factors.

1. Introduction

It has been advocated that economic orthodoxy is driving vocational education policy in a uniform way in Britain, Canada and Australia (Jackson 1993). This orthodoxy is held to be influencing policy in the implementation of common initiatives such as competency-based training and the development of standards for the measurement of student outcomes. Jackson contends that these common measures are concerned with ideologically-derived economic goals, such as good management through accountability, rather than educational goals. However, while there is similarity in policy orientation, there are also differences in the emphasis in both countries which grants distinction to policy and which privileges particular initiatives and practices. These differences are brought into focus through a comparison of VET policy across more than one country. For example, although there are similarities in the economic concerns within the overall goals for vocational education policy, the approaches and priorities adopted in Australia are different from those in adopted in the United Kingdom (UK). These differences are not adequately explained by economic and ideological factors alone. This is because differences which underpin the detail of policy and practice are also influenced by political factors associated with institutional and historical bases. Consequently, it cannot be claimed that VET policy-making is held captive to solely economic goals. It is also influenced by the values of particular authoritative actors (ideology) and situational (history, institutional norms) political factors.

The paper, firstly, identifies differences in orientations in VET policy between the United Kingdom and Australian vocational education systems. This analysis includes reference to
initiatives being adopted in both countries. Necessarily, this analysis focuses on the policies of the previous Labor federal government in Australia and that of the previous Conservative government in the UK. This is because both governments were in office for extended periods of time at about the same time and had implemented comprehensive VET policy. Reference is also made to the emerging policies of the new governments in both countries. A policy analysis framework is then introduced. This framework is then used to examine the Modern Apprenticeships which is being implemented in the UK and how the transformation of existing institutional and historically-based values would be required before the highly deregulated policies could to be implemented here.

2 Goals and priorities

In order to tease out the similarities and differences across the two countries it is worth examining the declared goals and priorities for policy. The goals and priorities of the United Kingdom's approach to vocational education policy, articulated by the previous Major government, are as follows.

**Overall Goal**

*to improve private and public investment in training by developing systems which are capable of responding flexibly and coherently to changes in customer expectations, new markets and opportunities arising from new technologies.*

(Employment Department 1993a).

The rationale underpinning this overall goal is essentially economic with a belief that an adequate and appropriate skill supply is a prerequisite for both business and individual success. In this way it is similar to those enacted in Australia. The key role for vocational education in developing Australia as the ‘clever country’ in which enterprises are to be both export-orientated and import-competing, premised on an adaptable and flexible workforce (Dawkins 1988) is quite analogous to the UK system’s goals. The UK policy view is founded upon the different parties in voluntary partnership towards agreed goals (Employment Department 1994 p.4), rather than through the bi-partite legislated policy arrangements favoured here. So, when compared with the goals of the previous Australian government’s national training reform agenda commonality is evident in the objectives associated with economic performance (being internationally competitive) and in the emphasis on exploiting economic opportunities. However, the Australian policy adopted a more collective approach premised upon mandation, regulation and legislation to drive policy and practice, which included the welfare of both employers and employees. This lead to a high degree of regulation and control such as the development of highly detailed and prescriptive uniform national curriculum premised on industry standards, the mandatory use of competency-based training. Nationally consistent recognition and accreditation frameworks have been adopted here to manage these arrangements. In contrast, the United Kingdom model emphasises the centrality of the individual and voluntarism in participation, reflecting differences in ideology and political institutions. These difference are particularly discernible in the goals, subgoals and priorities which seek to secure the overall goal. For example, the UK policy documents are as follows:

**Goal: Prosperity through skills.**

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1 Although reference is made to the United Kingdom system, this refers to England, Wales and Northern Ireland but not Scotland. The latter has an independent policy-making mechanism, although many aspects and initiatives are common to both systems.
To increase individual and national prosperity by stimulating enterprise and developing excellence in skills (Employment Department 1993b p.5).

Priorities

Priority One: Employers, the self-employed, and individual people in the workforce, investing effectively in the skills needed for business creation and growth, and for individual success. *(Skills for success)*

Priority Two: People who are out of work or at a disadvantage in the labour market acquiring and maintaining relevant skills and obtaining appropriate support to enable them to compete better for employment or self employment and to contribute effectively to the economy. *(Equipped for employment)*

Priority Three: Encouraging and enabling young people to gain the skills and enterprising attitudes needed for entry to the workforce and to prepare them to realise their full potential throughout their working life, and in particular to progress to NVQ level 3 and beyond, if they are able. *(Maximising young people’s potential)*

Priority Four: Making the market for vocational education and training work better so that it responds to the changing needs of employers and individual needs quickly and cost effectively. *(A responsive market).* Source (Employment Department 1993b; 1994)

Within these priorities, the role of individuals as economic agents is repeatedly emphasised, as is their responsibility for their own development and success. This view privileges individuals’ contributions and responsibilities through values which are liberal and individualistic. Conversely, the Australian policy emphasises collective contribution enacted through regulated industrial agreements, which are subject to bi-partite agreement. The UK orientation is illustrated further in its deregulated approach to vocational education which it seeks to encourage and enable individual participation and progress (e.g., “to stimulate”), but avoids mandating detailed arrangements. This deregulation is evident in the more decentralised approach take to policy implementation. Although the overall national goals were centrally-derived in the United Kingdom, decision-making about many training and employment-related issues are devolved to the region in which the programs are enacted. Conversely, the Australian system is founded upon state and nationally-based industry advisory processes, which results in the mandating of policy initiatives in great detail and prescriptiveness in a centralised 'top-down' fashion because the mandated CBT approach requires accountability measures to be implemented (Lundberg 1997). Many of these initiatives are based around national standards and industry awards (e.g CBT, RPL, modularised syllabi). In the Australian system, it appears that the significance of vocational education it is too important to be left to local decision-makers, and requires centrally-derived input from the industry partners. However, in the British system important decisions are taken by regional stakeholders. Moreover, the detail of centrally-derived curriculum documents appears not to be as prescriptive in terms of content as those in Australia.

In the next section, some specific examples of VET policy mechanisms and practices are discussed in order to delineate further these differences.
2.1 Industry-led VET systems
Both the British and Australian VET systems currently embrace industry leadership in decision-making. Differences in the choice and composition of the ‘authoritative voices’ (Ball 1990) of that leadership are evident because the construction of the concepts of ‘industry’ are quite remote from each other. That is different sorts of values and decisions are evident, which are a product of the voices of those selected to have input into government policy. In Britain, the use of industry lead-bodies as a central body of advice and policy development for VET is well established. However, employer bodies dominate most of the decision-making bodies in the UK unlike Australia, with its bi-partite notion of industry comprising representatives of employers and employees. While there are pockets of union involvement in those industries that have survived the massive restructuring of the British economy (e.g. engineering), overall the union role is restricted and cannot be seen as being the structural element (partnerships) in VET decision-making in the way they have operated in Australia over the last ten years or so. Therefore, whereas the UK arrangements reflect structural changes to the economy and the partial defeat of organised labour, the circumstances of the Australian arrangements reflect the entrenchment of decision-making about vocational education and training in an industrial relations system. So interrelated factors associated with history, ideology and political orientation have cast the concept of industry-leadership in quite different ways. The Australian concept is leadership by industrial relations practitioners and institutions, whereas the British system reflects more the voice of employers at both the national and local levels. Again, this indicates that beyond governments seeking to convince industry of their responsiveness to economic imperatives (Jackson 1993) that differences in these authoritative voices, and the institutions which underpin those voices, suggests broad political factors influencing policy formation including societal and institutional histories.

2.2 Local economic development and regeneration
Differences in the focus of decision-making are also apparent in the degree by which decentralised decision-making is an inherent element of policy. While both systems have aspects of centralisation, a far greater degree of decentralisation seems evident in the UK approach. In particular, the policy focus is on promoting an integrated approach to delivery of programs at the local level. While currently there is a clear national framework, a more deregulated and decentralised approach to policy exists with the acknowledgement that local needs are different and are, in part, dependent upon local interest to resolve the issues which the centrally-derived policy seeks to address. The concept guiding deliberations about local policy-making and implementation is "regeneration", which refers to transforming regions and communities which have experienced social and economic distress as a result of a restructuring of industry activity and decline in employment. This broad-based approach has seen the integration of programs which together provide: support for education and training, tackling crime, meeting ethnic minority needs, improving run-down housing and aiding the physical development of the community (Employment Department 1993a p. 2). The focus is on developing local partnerships, local solutions and priorities, within a national policy framework. This integrated policy approach is particularly evident in the integration of government services (Transport, Environment, Trade and Industry, Regional Development and Employment) and the bringing together of a series of government initiatives under a Single Regeneration Budget. It is claimed that "regional offices and a new single budget bring a more coherent approach to support for regeneration, economic development and industrial competitiveness" (Employment Department 1993a p.1). The Single Regeneration Budget is seen as a means of supporting regenerating, economic development and industrial competitiveness (Employment Department 1993a). There are currently few examples of such integrated approaches in Australia.
In this way, local goals of a different kind are being attempted and in ways that are distinct from those in Australia which has worked towards embedding decision-making in centralised industrial relations arrangements. These arrangements are not commensurate with those which would be successful in securing the local goals set by British government in their regeneration policy. In Australia, localised decision making is usually associated with programs that are not directly related to economic performance (e.g. recreation courses) or those associated with enterprise bargaining agreements which are increasingly becoming the norm. In the latter, there is sometimes reference to national standards, industrial agreements, or nationally-derived initiatives (e.g. CBT, RPL) as a basis for progressing curriculum.

2.3 Individual Commitment Policy
An explicit example of the UK emphasis on individuals and encouraging their responsibility and role in securing local and national goals, is the Individual Commitment Policy (ICP). This initiative aims to encourage individuals to make a commitment to their own personal and professional development (their life-long learning), and presumably shift the cost away from the public purse. The ICP is founded on the provision of information and income tax relief. Tax relief is available in the form of a grant that provides 25% relief on costs of self-education. Individuals can access either "soft" (non-vocational) or "hard" (vocational) courses under the scheme. To date, this program is being accessed by skilled or semi-skilled workers. Early appraisals indicate that key difference in participants’ motives is the desire for a career rather than just a job (Individual Commitment Policy 1995). It seems from this policy initiative that the concept of ‘life-long learning’ is now being cast in economic terms, albeit entrenched in a particular set of ideological values which views individuals as being responsible for their own vocational development.

So whereas government policy in Australia focused without success on encouraging enterprises to invest in their employees’ skill development, through the now abandoned Training Guarantee Scheme, the emphasis in Britain is directed at individuals and their investment in their futures. However, the introduction of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme and, more recently, the differentiated payments by students for their higher education, indicate that the individual is not being wholly ignored here in Australia. However, significantly in Australia this policy is not uniformly applied. Students in TAFE institutes of the same age as their counterparts in higher education are not subject to these payments. This is presumably because government is attempting to encourage higher levels of participation in TAFE level, despite a strong preference for gaining access to higher education. The lack of uniformity in approaches again indicates that factors other than economics and ideology influence the policy about individuals’ commitments and contributions.

3 A Framework for policy analysis
So there are similarities in the broad policy approach adopted in both Australia and Britain which is premised on securing important economic goals (Table 1). The overall goal is for education, and particularly vocational education to play a key role in generating a skilled workforce which is competitive in the global economy is similar. Yet, there are differences which appear to be influenced by historical, institutional and philosophic factors as well as the way economic orthodoxy is dispensed. Different orientations are evident in aspects of policy, such as partnerships, decision-making and the focus for participation. Historical and structural factors play a role in the acceptance of the local education decision-making in Britain, characterised by a former reliance upon Local Education Authorities (LEA) and now Training and Enterprise Councils (TEC). Equally, in Australia, the federal arrangements and the key role
for the industrial parties represent historical and political factors with entrenched values and institutions. So the characteristics of industry-leadership is also quite distinct which has a series of consequences for how policy initiatives are implemented, whose authoritative voices are selected and heard.

Table 1
Comparing the goals, structures and emphasis in VET policy: Australia and Britain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>United Kingdom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goals for VET</td>
<td>Economic development (international competitiveness) through a skilled workforce</td>
<td>Regeneration of economy to become internationally competitive through engendering enterprise and skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics and partnerships</td>
<td>Industry-led regulated VET system subject to bi-partite (employers and union) deliberations</td>
<td>Industry-led VET system, non-regulatory and focused on local arrangements and individual commitment (enterprises and personal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry-led</td>
<td>Industrial agreements (national and enterprise)</td>
<td>Occupational view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Industrial parties (unions and employers)</td>
<td>Employer perspective privileged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-making</td>
<td>Centralised with enactment through legislated, regulated and mandatory arrangements</td>
<td>Centralised overall framework (goals and aims)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National decisions</td>
<td>Decentralised delivery and transformation of policy goals and objectives at the local level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>State/territory discretion with implementation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ball (1990), drawing upon Althuser, proposes a framework comprising of economic, political and ideological levels by which to examine policy initiatives, because reference to only economic models does not adequately account for the nature of policy formation which is sometimes messy and indeterminate. These levels are held to be both dependent upon and independent of each other.

Abstract accounts tend towards tidy generalisations and often fail to capture the messy realities of influence, pressure, dogma, expediency, conflict, compromise, intransigence, resistance, error, opposition and pragmatism in the policy process (Ball 1990: 9).

In this model, the role of ideology is seen as being important in the allocation of values within policy making (those projecting ideal society) as well as economic factors. However, as policy implementation is not always coherent or rational it is also necessary to include those political factors (historical, institutional, normative) which inhabit decisions about policy. It is proposed that economic factors are in the background while political factors are in the foreground (Ball 1990). These factors enjoy relative autonomy from one another, making relationships between political and economic factors problematic, with ideological factors also influencing the generation of policy intent. Yet, from what has occurred in the UK it is possible to suggest that the ideological and political factors are mutually transformative. With the change of governments, the prospect is for the transformation of both the ideological and the political
factors. Nevertheless, these factors are in a particular historical and institutional milieu, making some of them particularly durable (e.g., state-federal relationships), which might mediate the character of the transformation of policy as is discussed below in the case study.

Using this type of analysis it is possible to propose that there is an economic background with ideological assumptions which is shaped by the agency of politics in the particular system (history, institutions and norms). In order to appraise the nature and consequences of these levels of factors, the next section examines the initiative of Modern Apprenticeship which has been enacted in the UK and reflects many of the characteristics of VET policy there as it: (i) aims to directly contribute to economic goals; (ii) is centrally determined but adopted and implemented at the local level; (iii) emphasises a non-regulated approach; (iv) places great emphasis on the individual to negotiate conditions; (v) places responsibility on enterprises to determine the nature and quality of the learning arrangements; and (vi) relies on commitment rather than regulation. This initiative is discussed with reference to Australian models of entry-level training such as apprenticeships and traineeships as it seems there are moves to have such a deregulated framework operating here.

4. Case Study: Modern Apprenticeships in the UK.

There has been a major decline of apprenticeship training over recent years in the United Kingdom, particularly as a result of a restructuring of those industries which traditionally fostered apprenticeships. Consequently, apprenticeships no longer exist in either the number of or range of industries as they had previously resulting in a shortfall in the supply of skilled workers. In 1993 there were 245,000 apprentices in Britain (38% service sector, 18% in construction, 33% in production industries) (Employment Department 1994 p.20). Attempts to resurrect interest in apprenticeships is through proposing enterprises participate in Modern Apprenticeship programs. The title “Modern Apprenticeships” is held to have a wider appeal with the adjective "modern" being marketable to the young people who are targeted in this program and who might associate apprenticeships with only 'blue collar' activities (Ernst & Young 1994). Modern Apprenticeships aim to provide 16-17 year olds with work-based training at technician, craft and supervisor levels (NVQ level 3 and above) to provide training to NVQs level 3 and which are usually between two and half and three years in duration. Like similar initiatives in Australia (e.g., AVTS and New Apprenticeships), the aim is for the universal application of apprenticeships across industry sectors, not only those which traditionally have fostered apprenticeships. National criteria have been established for Modern Apprenticeship arrangements which are as follows.

i) The training must lead to an NVQ at Level 3 or above.
ii) It must also provide for breadth and flexibility according to sector and employer needs.
iii) The training must not be based on time serving but on achievement of outcomes at the pace appropriate to the trainee.
iv) The training will be formalised in a training plan.
v) The training plan will be underpinned by a written training agreement between the employer (or group of employers) and the young person, and will be underwritten by the TEC.
vi) The training agreement will express the rights and obligations of both parties and the commitment to see training through.
vii) Ideally all apprentices should be employed from the start of their training.
viii) Wages and allowances will be a matter between the young person and the employer.
ix) Selection and recruitment are matters for individual employers.
Modern Apprenticeships is an equal opportunity programme. (Hertfordshire Training and Enterprise Council 1995)

These criteria emphasise key economic, ideological and political goals. The criteria detail the level of training and the need for a training agreements. However, matters of wages, conditions and details of the training agreement are to be determined between the apprentice and employer, which is quite different than those which existed in Australia where more regulated and uniform approaches are utilised. Also, they do not formally mandate that the apprentices have to be employed, hence compounding issues of remuneration and access to purposeful work experiences. This initiative seeks to replicate features of the German Dual model, as do recent programs in Australia such as the Australian Vocational Certificates and New Apprenticeships. Yet, unlike the German model (or for that matter the Australian approach) and despite a mandatory training plan there is no structured training arrangements mandated (e.g 75% on-the-job 25% off-the-job). Decisions about combination of on and off-the-job experiences are at the discretion of the individual employers, as are levels of remuneration. Hence, key areas of pay and training differ across Modern Apprenticeships within the same industry sector. The sponsorship of apprentices by enterprises is also differentiated. Some apprentices don't really have workplace placements. Instead, they are college-based with occasional visits from their "host" enterprises. So, although full employment status is viewed as desirable this has not always been able to be negotiated (78% of apprenticeships claimed to be employed 11% were not). As stated above, the UK orientation focused on encouragement and support, and an avoidance of regulating arrangements. For example, to enhance the standing and credibility of these relationships there has been an attempt to resurrect the “pledge” between employer and employee. Formally, the ‘pledge’ was an informal agreement between the employer and apprentice about the latter’s indenture. However, there are differences in the nature of enterprise commitment, so whereas in some instances "the pledge" is viewed as being a meaningful obligation by both parties, in others it is ignored. However, it is the voluntary nature of this statement of obligation which has been seized upon by British policy makers - to encourage but not to regulate.

In the Modern Apprenticeships prototypes, the profile of the apprentices was not consistent with those of more traditional arrangements. For example, the target group for these apprenticeships was 16-18 year olds. However, the average age of the participants in the prototypes was 19 years. Also, half of the participants in the prototypes had five or more Grade A-C GCSEs, which does not reflect a typical apprenticeship cohort which has lower levels of school achievement (see Table 2). Another consequence of the regulated and enterprise based approach is the entrenching of gender-based access to employment and remuneration. In the prototypes, 89% of the apprentices were male. In three sectors - Agriculture, Engineering construction and the Steel industry - all the apprentices were male and were paid on average £68 per week. In the Childcare and Business administration sectors, all apprentices were female being paid on average £43 per week. So it seems, a deregulated enterprise-led entry-level training system may entrench further the existing patterns of participation and remuneration. Employer preference for particular age groups led to the recruitment of 18 year olds, rather than those in the target group. This was reported as particularly being the case in sectors such as Retailing which required workers to perform without supervision (Ernst & Young 1994). Table 2 indicates differences in qualifications and pay rates across industry sectors and the rates of wages payable within sectors.

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2 These findings came from an unpublished evaluation of the Modern Apprenticeship prototypes undertaken by Dr Jerry Wellington and Dr Lorna Unwin of the University of Sheffield.

3 The term prototype has been adopted to move away from the term trial or pilot which are viewed as not necessarily leading to refinement and implementation.
The findings from the prototypes has consequences for Australian entry-level training provisions. Historically, these provisions are based on industry agreements which regulated uniform pay rates as well as detailing the on and off-the-job training provisions. However, in seeking to achieve a competitive skills base limited reference has been made to mandated details of the training arrangement or provision of wages and training arrangements. This circumstance illustrates the essential difference in policy based on political factors associated with institutions and patterns of influence. Whereas these type of arrangements may be permissible within the political environment of the United Kingdom, they may not be currently acceptable in Australia with its industrial awards which seek to provide award-based payments which might vary only by state. The central role that unions have played in these agreements and their association to industrial awards is antithetical to the concept of a young trainee or apprentice being placed in the position of having to negotiate remuneration levels. From the overview above it is evident that aspects of deregulation have consequences in terms of pay and gender segmentation of the workforce that are unlikely to overcome without particular regulated (and government sponsored) interventions. So taking the policy process on its own terms, it is evident that it is not captive to purely economic factors. Rather, a complex of factors determine policy including the particular ideology of the government. For example, the likelihood of regulated interventions appears to be one of authoritative vales of the government in power and important normative values such as the valuing of paid on-the-job training also having an off-the-job component. It is possible to speculate to what degree, the current federal government will be able to exercise its ideological (values associated with the ideal society) autonomy or be constrained by political factors (institutions, history and norms). Therefore, adherence to economic orthodoxy is likely to only be one basis for further policy determinations as a broader range of factors will also play a role. Instead, political factors and the ability to transform historically derived factors such as societal norms are likely to important if VET policy here is to be transformed the way that has occurred in the

### Table 2 - Apprentice initial qualifications and remuneration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Apprentice Qualifications by sector</th>
<th>Weekly Salary by sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GASES 5+ A-B Grades</td>
<td>GASES 5+ A-C Grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business admin</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemicals</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrical manufacture</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering construction</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information technology</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marine &amp; engineering</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retailing</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steel</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel services</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source Ernst & Young 1995)
United Kingdom. Certainly, this government is seeking to erode a number of the political and institutional bases which would inhibit such a transformation. However, others are likely to remain (e.g., state-federal relations) and are likely to influence the character of VET policy in this country.

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