Building Inclusive University Cultures:

How can universities take action against discrimination?

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ROUNDTABLE

INTRODUCTION[1]

This piece is based on a discussion that took place in the culminating episode 5 on Building Inclusive University Cultures in the webinar series "Let's Talk, Let's Act: Addressing Discrimination in Danish Higher Education" headed by the Gender and Equality Team at the University of Southern Denmark as part of the Danish National Impact Plan in the EU GENDERACTIONplus project. The series was a five-part webinar series held in spring 2025 aimed to address different forms and aspects of intersectional discrimination in higher education, specifically focusing on how to build a less discriminatory university context that actively fights against racism, sexism, ableism, queerphobia, transphobia, and other forms of discrimination and inequalities.

These issues are not only highly relevant, but are also being discussed more and more, not least since the #MeToo movement started spreading into Danish Academia in 2020, when a group of scholars started a petition that collected more than 800 testimonials about harassment and discrimination from researchers in Denmark (Einersen et al. 2021). In 2024, the research institute VIVE published a report on sexism at Danish universities, commissioned by the Ministry of Higher Education and Science as a response to the #MeToo movement in Danish academia (Lesner et al. 2024). The findings of this report show that scholars, especially junior scholars, continuously experience sexist as well as other intersectional forms of discrimination in Danish higher education institutions (2024). This work shows that taking action against discrimination should be a core priority for universities.

The participants in this roundtable, Mie Plotnikof, Associate Professor at Aarhus University, Mira C. Skadegård, Associate Professor at Aalborg University, and Sheena Vachhani, Professor at the University of Bristol, discuss discrimination in higher education from an intersectional perspective and focus on the important question of how to implement meaningful and intersectional Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) work in universities.

UNLEARNING AND RELEARNING THE COMPLEXITY OF DISCRIMINATION

Bontu Guschke: I would like to start with a question that relates to the overarching challenge of how to do anti-discrimination work that pays attention to more than one aspect of inequality. So, how to do gender equality work that also pays attention to queerphobia and transphobia? How to do DEI work that explicitly addresses racism? How to do feminist work that talks about ableism? Etcetera. How do we make sure that this anti-discrimination work and knowledge doesn't just reproduce one "dominant" DEI or equality discourse, but actually stays open to the plurality of different perspectives?

Mira C Skadegård: For me, when I hear your question, I think, well, how hard could that be? Because as I see it, discrimination is inherently intersectional. You can't think about – or, I can't at least - I don't know how to think about discrimination without thinking about all of the different bases for discrimination. My work is grounded in the human rights framework which means that there is a very, very clearly defined group of protected categories or protected groups that all are included under this notion of non-discrimination in our laws. And you're right, on the one hand, legally what we have traditionally done is this single axis approach where we thought, well, either it's gender or it's disability. But if you look at humans, that's not a thing. There's no such thing as a free-floating gender or free-floating ability. We are always all of those things.

What we have to do is unlearn what we have learned and relearn what discrimination means and what it's about, because we're talking about how power is implicated in the body, or in the subject. And that there's no two subjects that are going to be meeting discrimination in the same ways because of the way in which we are all this complex.

So, what does this mean? My answer would be that if

we have genuine knowledge around discrimination and anti-discrimination and racism and gender, if we really understand those concepts well, then we would be able to better embrace the complexity of those identities. The problem isn't the lack of knowledge sometimes, it's the inability to embrace complexity because we've all been taught that simplicity, easy answers, and simple categories are the effective way to work. So, thinking in one category becomes the easy way out, but it's not the knowledgeable way out.

Mie Plotnikof: I think we can argue that we need to knowledge-base the way that we work with it. If, say, a new economic model was developed we would expect organizations to consider and implement that in relevant work practices. This is exactly the same; we have lots of emerging frameworks that are thoroughly working with intersectional perspectives. So, we should be able to expect that organizations – including educational institutions – will consider and use them in future work with those issues. In my view, we have reached a point where we can insist on this fact and say: "This is a knowledge area. We have got advanced knowledge to lean on, including both theories and actionable frameworks suggesting how to deal with this and how to explore these intersectional matters. So, we expect that this is the basis of this kind of work in our organizations".

Sheena Vachhani: I was just going to follow up on that because you've really made me think also about how this connects to the will to change. We can say this knowledge exists, or the frameworks are there, but what foregrounds the learning is the kind of political impetus or the will to move, you know, have the wheels in motion to get to a better place. And that political will is the thing that I think we sometimes might struggle with. There's no shortage of good intention, but then there's little being put forward in terms of commitment of resources or sacrifice. What do universities let go of in order to build time, money, and effort into the longevity of different DEI practices? And I guess that, you know, there's a real connection that needs to be made between the existence of the knowledge and then the desire to have that developed.

Bontu: Which relates to this point you were just making, Mira, that it needs to be an unlearning and a relearning. So, we need the step of unlearning first in a way to let go of what we expect this kind of knowledge to look like, what we expect to be easy solutions, single-sided approaches. And understanding that maybe that is part of the sacrifice: letting go of that kind of idea of what it might look like. And then being open to that plurality and being open to bearing the weight of differences.

ANCHORING CHANGE IN FORMAL AND INFORMAL STRUCTURES

Bontu: A related question to that is: who is part of organizing that process of unlearning and relearning, and who is then bringing that knowledge to the table, so to speak? The VIVE report shows quite clearly that discrimination is an issue for many people, but there are groups that are at a higher risk of being discriminated against, people in precarious positions, junior scholars, but also, as the report shows, bisexual women, women not born in Denmark, etcetera. So, it also makes me think about this question: Who is actually part of creating this knowledge? Who has a voice in these discussions? Whose perspectives are being valued, and who is currently missing in the equality and anti-discrimination work? And how do we make sure that these perspectives are brought in and that they actually have a say? Is that through DEI councils? Is that through self-organized work? Is that in the formal structures? How do we make sure that a variety of perspectives is actually represented and listened to, and what is hindering us from achieving that so far?

Sheena: Yeah, it's a really good question: Who is excluded? And I think there's probably too many to mention, right? There are those 'protected characteristics' in the UK inequality language. But within that is the messiness inside those categories of difference, and then all those dimensions of difference that we probably don't readily talk about or invoke day-to-day.

I think what really struck me is that there is a whole range of politics around what grassroots movements can do when they're not institutionalized in formal structures. We talk about structural systemic change, but then we also have to talk about spaces of resistance that are organizing separately from those structures and architectures that have historically, certainly for feminist progress, been incredibly important. And we have to have that combination, but also recognize the paradox that pushing more and more into informal spaces means that existing structures in organizations don't get critically pushed at or their boundaries don't get pushed far enough. So, I think that for me, there's a lot of reflexive work that we need to do in feminist communities or in anti-racist movements that then can, in some ways, trickle into universities. You know, almost having spaces that feel more politically agile and less institutionalized.

In the UK we've had equality legislation since the 1970s, yet we don't see the progress that we would expect from having that very important intervention. And that's a very reductive way of saying we need multiple, varied strategies here. So, I don't know if the answers are councils, I guess that is one way. But I find the DEI architecture, certainly in UK higher education, very challenging to engage with for meaningful change because there is so much instrumentalization: "Let's market the equalities we have rather than focusing on the inequalities." So, we get pay gap reporting, but what happens on the basis of that in terms of meaningful change is really difficult.

Bontu: As I hear you, it's maybe also a bit of an issue of: there is formal work happening, there's informal work happening, but it doesn't always connect in a way that actually leads to change. I would be curious, Mie and Mira, how you see that in the Danish context? Do you see potential or maybe even also positive examples of where there's formal and informal work coming together, broadening the perspectives, bringing in voices that otherwise maybe wouldn't have a space in the formal structures of higher education?

Mira: I'm, in a way, very disappointed to hear that it's not much better in the UK because there's been a much more explicit and practical application there, and I've looked to the UK for much of the research we draw on the Danish context. So that's a little bit sad, but of course, there's always the geopolitical and the political, different things that also play into this. In the Danish context, we can still hide a little bit behind the fact that we simply really, actually, genuinely don't have much qualified academic knowledge around these things that people have been used to using. It's been there - it's been around for a very long time. It's not that, but it's like it hasn't been an integrated part.

I do see some good examples of practice in some student organizations. For example, some years ago, the University of Copenhagen got quite a lot of attention around the fact that there was a discriminatory curriculum and there were problems in different departments, certainly in terms of gender and race. And I believe also disability. And that push back - even though it became a conflict and the student organization that did this put themselves in a terrible position, and their academic opportunities were impacted. For example, some of them experienced that they could not get hired for a PhD because of their participation in this critical group; so the repercussions for this minoritized group of students became a taxation - however, we did see that what they did created some waves and we did see that universities started thinking in a different way.

And there's another university where you see a very active institutionalized practice, trying to get people working with the diversity framework and doing some monitoring within the different departments. And while I have a lot of critique in regard to the way that they're doing it, it is still something. So, somehow this discussion over the last 5-10 years at the informal, the political, at the activist level has done something for some areas. What it actually means in practice, especially in the current political situation, that would be interesting to see. But we can't live without the informal processes. We can't live without the activisms, and the different movements because

without them, we wouldn't have anything.

Bontu: I think this links back to the question of how we make sure that this knowledge is not just the dominant discourse and not just from the dominant perspective, even within the DEI work. I think it's exactly that point of being consistently self-critical, inviting people in who maybe make us uncomfortable or challenge us, but that's what we need to do consistently.

Mira: And can I just say one thing? I know we're all very upset about the American situation and what they're saying and all that, but in some strange little way, it's also really important to address that critique seriously. We need to ask. What has been going on in this DEI conversation? How much of it has been a diversity industrial complex? How much of it has been diversity washing? How much of it has been genuine? Maybe this really awful situation forces us to think more critically about what this field is. How is it situated in knowledge? In which ways is it a reproduction of power? In which ways is it not? Because, as much as I find it upsetting, I'm actually not that worried. I think it's interesting. What will this do to the conversation? Will we become open to more critically assessing what we're doing? I'm just thinking that we could see this as an opportunity.

Bontu: Mie, maybe I can pass this on to you and also add a little bit to it. I know that in our audience, we have quite a wide variety of people working in different positions across higher education. If we have people working in HR, people working in the DEI boards, maybe people working in law or legal positions within universities, how can they be part of creating that push towards equality and anti-discrimination from these organizational positions? Which challenges might there be, but also what should be prioritized because it really makes a difference?

Mie: I want to start by saying that I think they are already doing it. And that's really important to acknowledge when we talk about it. It can sound like people do not want to do it. But I do think that we've seen lots of changes the past 5-7-ish years. And one of the main changes or shifts that I have seen as crucial is that this has become a legitimate issue to raise. So, we can actually raise discriminatory issues and expect to be heard in a proper manor. And this shift is super, super important. And it is happening thanks to a lot of these people working from those different organizational positions.

The other shift that I want to attend to is that 5 - 10 years ago this was often referred to as opinion-based discussions. And now more and more people respect that those are knowledge-based discussions. And especially people who are sitting in HR functions or in different committees or councils know that advanced knowledge about these issues and various types of solutions exists, which can help them inform their work. Of course, we don't have simple, easy fixes when it's about discrimination, but we still have lots of knowledge. I have experienced this quite a lot the past five years when giving talks or being asked about relevant literature. I see this as a gesture of the people working with the formal structures of the universities; they are helping to push all of us in the university forward because they want to make sure that if we don't know how to deal with it, we need to figure out how to get more informed. So there's this upskilling often coming from people themselves, but I want to stress that such upskilling can also be formalized. And it should be, because we need everyone to who works in this area to know about the newest policies or anti-discriminatory efforts and so on. Of course, upskilling can also be on a case-by-case basis. And I think we need to think of it in both ways actually.

And then, the last thing that I want to touch upon in this discussion: you started asking who are we missing or which voices might not be represented in these both formal and informal groups, but maybe especially in the formalized groups. And I think this is really one of the biggest challenges we are facing, because the people with the most important experiences regarding intersecting forms of oppression and discrimination, the people we really need to learn from, those are the people who are often trying to hide because they don't want to become a problem.

So, there's really a dilemma built into anti-discriminatory work: we need knowledge from people who are already extremely vulnerable. And this is one of the areas where I'm really thinking that everyone who's working with DEI somehow either as practitioners, as activists, or as researchers, we have an extra responsibility to somehow sensitize ourselves to those vulnerable positions without outing them. And also without being or taking on this normative, better-knowing kind of arrogant position. That's not what I'm advocating. This is really one of the challenges that we're facing to move beyond white feminism, to move beyond this white saviour complex. And I'm really unsure how to do it. And I don't see examples from the formal structures of how to do it. Of course, we have representatives from different positions in the councils, for example. But I don't think that's the point here.

STAYING REFLECTIVE AND SELF-CRITICAL

Mira: I was thinking about it in a slightly different way because I immediately started thinking about how we do teaching. We're a university. We automatically already exclusive and elitist. If you just look at our groups of students or the people who are working there, we have to ask who's missing? That's a good place to start. Who's not there, who's not represented? This isn't rocket science. A simple way to start is to look at each protected group, look at the context you are assessing, and you're like, oh, that's interesting. There seems to be a low representation of people with particular types of disability or people with a particular class, social class background, and so on.

So, it's not that hard to look at who's here, who's not here, who's missing if we were to do it that way. But it's also how we do our institutions, how we do our practices, how we do our meeting structures, how we do our teaching practices, how we invite students to participate in which ways. And we've been talking about this for years. So, it's nothing new really. There's all of these different ways in which we can invite without speaking for, speaking on behalf of, or presuming about individuals that they may or may not be vulnerable in different ways.

I always go back to: How are we understanding ourselves in these rooms? How am I able to stay vigilant about my own knowledge position, my extremely privileged position? It's also very much our own introspective work and facing ourselves, looking at ourselves in the mirror, which is not always fun.

So, how do you do that work? By making a lot of mistakes along the way, I think. And being able to live with that and being able to apologize in that process when we do step on toes, because there's just no way around stepping on toes. But then you go back to this discussion. And there is a challenge here, because this sometimes involves giving up the privilege of authority – the presumption that we are right merely because we are academics. People in these positions of power and privilege, giving up the right to always be right; that is an entitlement that we have. You are probably going to have to give something up if you're going to do this.

Sheena: I think that it's such an important point around the fear and anxiety that many people have doing this type of work. It's both, as Mira was saying, deeply introspective and reflexive. Or it could be collectively reflexive. If we talk about, as a kind of case example, our ability to discuss race is fraught with huge challenges in terms of language. I mean, we just had mandatory acceptable behaviour training in our university, and it started with: "Don't worry, nothing's gone hugely wrong. We just want everyone to be on the same page." But of course, the language that's used in these rooms doesn't always lean towards a reflexive, embodied, maybe vulnerable kinds of spaces that we need in order to progress or move forward in terms of the discussions we have.

It also brings up this kind of relationship between expert knowledge and experiential knowledge what our lived experiences, our embodied experiences offer - we spend our time masking some of those and sometimes exposing our individual experiences.

So, there's something around the question: How do we tackle the anxiety of DEI work, from all of us who question ourselves every day? But then there are plenty of people who don't even think in these terms. What is our role to then be able to open up conversations with them?

Someone raised a question about the impossibility of even invoking terms like feminist when there is an increasingly hostile environment to using politicized language around equality. But I would also agree with Mira's point around how, as horrific as the now probably global attacks on DEI work are, and partly as a result of far-right populism, it does open up critical conversations. If we move beyond outrage, what does it do to strengthen our communities? And that could be a source of potential change or social transformation where we aren't simply moving between feeling sometimes disenchanted with some of these policies and practices because they're not doing enough, and then to create new ways of thinking/being with DEI. It maybe opens up conversations.

Bontu: It's really interesting that both of you mentioned that. I think often when you feel like your field is under attack, there's this intuitive reaction to close down and defend it. And I think it's very interesting that both of you are rather saying, well, if we get beyond that state of maybe outrage or wanting to defend, and also to some degree needing to defend, how can we also use it as an opening to challenge ourselves and discuss more?

Molly Occhino: A related question that the audience finds relevant is the following: Sometimes racism can be experienced in non-typical ways. There's, for example, linguistic and cultural racism towards different communities. So, how can we address different forms of racism?

Mira: Naming and bringing these also atypical forms of discrimination into a conversation, looking at them. Naming it, understanding it, addressing it. We've got to confront the different assorted elephants in the room. We've got to address them, and we've got to try to understand: What are the dynamics? In which ways are which power axes in play here? So, naming it, addressing it, and looking at it and having the uncomfortable conversation would be my take on that. And to do that, you do have to learn *how* to have the uncomfortable conversation. How do I act in that situation in order to make that conversation possible and empathetic and caring?

Mie: That's the point I wanted to raise with response-able leadership. It's doing that difficult labour and developing that relational capacity to take responsibility, to respond in relation to others when you encounter these moments, but without prior to that thinking that you have a fixed answer or an easy solution, but that you know that you need to become response-able to the problem when you meet it in a caringly and ethically responsible way. This is really where we are at regarding DEI and anti-discriminatory work in my view. I'm seeing it with the formal leaders and managers, but also other practitioners that I'm working with – how to develop that capacity? It will be full of discomfort. It will be affective labour. But it will also be empowering. It is actually the capacity to be in that discomfort and to dare hold on to that moment without knowing how it's going to unfold but knowing that you know how to take care of it in ethically considerable and caring ways.

Sheena: It really made me think about the context and the environment that actually allows that discomfort to feel OK or to feel palatable because something that has come up in different events I've been part of is we talk about cultivating spaces or self-organized forms of solidarity, for example, which feel intuitive and embodied and you connect to certain individuals who have similar skills of active listening or suspending their own ego in order to lean into discomfort. But that is not as common as it could be if we're talking about proliferating this work across universities.

How do you build spaces of vulnerability that allow people to not get it right and explore experiences that they never have before, certainly in the workplace? I think that for me has been the real challenge.

How do you build these within the power dynamics of institutions? How do you build spaces where these conversations are OK and that my words are not going to be politicized at a later date or reabsorbed by managerial architectures/structures that then reduce that space.

I was just thinking about those good examples that I was struggling to find earlier. There's been some great work around sexual harassment especially student activism against sexual harassment, and reducing the use of NDAs (non-disclosure agreements) so that they're not silencing victims. And there's also been some great work on decolonizing the curriculum and universities more broadly.

FOSTERING TRUST AND UNCOMFORTABILITY IN SPACES FOR CHANGE

Molly: I want to connect that to another question. It reminded me of Audre Lorde's brilliant quote about how the classroom is still one of the most radical spaces in the university. What actions do you recommend that the teachers among us take up in their teaching?

Sheena: We have these conversations certainly at Bristol, kind of ad infinitum. I feel that the student cohorts I teach are very different from 10, or even 15, years ago, and there is much more unspeakability, and that means you have to be a much more agile teacher, I guess, being able to sense what is possible to talk about. We have had some not particularly great examples of colleagues trying to bring in very difficult topics, for example, slavery, but then not creating what I was just talking about, not cultivating those spaces by which to have an open, relatively safe or reflective conversation. Safe is probably not the right term, but a situation where students, students of colour in particular, don't feel uncomfortable in highly disproportionate ways. You know, Bristol, the institution as well as the city, has been reckoning with its relationship with the slave trade and the history of slavery. But for some time now with marketization of the sector, and certainly in the Business School, it has been quite challenging to realize Lorde's notion of a radical space of pedagogy. I'd love to hear more about the Danish context. I want to be more hopeful here. But I often find it more of a challenge now than years ago because of censorship in UK institutions and the very live conversations around academic freedom - and that's been particularly evident with the problematic of 'gender critical' scholars and free speech arguments in the UK more generally – in some ways, it has made it more difficult to have these spaces.

Mie: First, I want to touch upon a very basic point about the space that you talked about before, Sheena, namely creating that space. I don't think safe spaces are necessarily possible, but at least accountable spaces, creating such spaces also dependent on the size of a class. If you have 120 students, creating a radical course, a norm-critical pedagogy is extremely difficult. But sometimes we are lucky enough to have smaller classes.

As educators, we really need to think: When am I in a working condition where I can develop these radical spaces? And I think this is really also a critical issue in higher education where we are pressured to include more and more and more because of economic reasons. It becomes harder and harder to create those spaces and to really push the learning space into radical discussions. But I do think at least in the Danish system -and this of course also depends on which educational program you're in - we do have classes that are small enough to experiment with this.

The other thing is that we really need to think much more in terms of collegiality because I cannot become radical on my own. I need my great colleagues. I need time to think with literature and with history and with potential futures. So, daring to insist that this is time-consuming and creating those more radical courses where we really have time to think through the different aspects of teaching is as equally important labour in line with, say. writing a paper, going to a conference, or submitting a grant proposal.

Molly: I'm going to ask one last question: How can

we create and encourage more male allies? And I think it's an important thing to address when we're also talking about privilege, when we're talking about power, when we're talking about positionality, also institutional positionality. Is it through the collegial solidarity that you're talking about Mie? Is this through the critical utopian work? Is this through something totally else?

Mira: I think the best way for me to respond to that is that if we understand discrimination as structural, historical, cultural, institutionalized and as part of the world we're living in, we need to move into a more knowledgeable understanding of what that actually means. And that would be in one way certainly to say that this is not about the oppressed versus the non-oppressed. It's a much more complex and interwoven problem in which everybody's actually implicated. It may implicate you in the sense that you have privileges you did not ask for, did not know you were going to have, and that you take for granted. But you are certainly implicated in your different privileged positionalities as well, which whether you like it or not also puts you in the position of being part of – imbricated in - this very contentious debate which has become a kind of 'bad guys versus good guys' space.

I'm not saying that all people are implicated equally. It's not to speak to that at all, but it is to speak to the fact that this notion of us against them is an extremely simplified, debilitating and problematic way to go about this issue. We need to see ourselves as we actually are, that is part of the problem as well as the solution, all of us.

Sheena: I think we've sometimes got to suspend a sense of shame around distributed privileges. I think a key driver for anti-DEI sentiment is that many people who would be socially designated as having certain privileges don't feel that they have them, in an experiential or lived sense. And so the resentment that then comes out of that is a barrier to opening up conversations and creating the shared burden that you're talking about, Mira. And the difficult work of trying to reduce that resentment would maybe open up the potential for normalizing that discomfort and sharing the burden.

Mie: I agree, and we do have agency, we can create all kinds of allyships, and we need to think about that instead of thinking in the oppositional terms that we are trained to think in.

Bontu: A huge thank you to all three of you, Mie, Mira, and Sheena, for everything you shared. It's been a pleasure discussing with you and learning from and with you.

NOTES

[1] Bontu Guschke is a researcher, facilitator, consultant, and speaker on diversity and anti-discrimination. She earned her PhD at the Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School, researching the persistence of sexism and racism at universities. As a consultant, facilitator, and speaker, she works with organizations to develop diverse and inclusive work environments.

Molly Occhino is a diversity and inclusion special consultant in the Gender & Equality Team at the University of Southern Denmark. They are also a Ph.D. fellow in the Dept. of Social Science and Business at Roskilde University. Their work focuses on macro-, meso- and micro- forms of discrimination in social systems and structures, as well as everyday care and resistance strategies.

Mie Plotnikof is Associate Professor of Educational Governance and Organization at Aarhus University, Denmark. Her research engages with the politics and performativity of organizational discourses, norms of difference, intersecting inequalities, and power-resistance dynamics, often in educational contexts. She has published in outlets such as Organization; Gender, Work & Organization; Scandinavian Journal of

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Management; ephemera; and Organization Studies. She was also one of the initiators of a sexism petition in Danish higher education in the fall of 2020 resulting in two related books and the website www.sexismedu.dk.

Mira C. Skadegård is an Associate Professor at Aalborg University in Copenhagen, Denmark, and holds a PhD focused on structural discrimination. Her research explores structural and systemic forms of oppression and discrimination in everyday life, organizations, and institutional settings. Mira also works extensively with topics related to social sustainability and the practical implementation of DEI principles across various sectors.

Sheena J. Vachhani is Professor of Work and Organisation Studies at the University of Bristol, UK, INSPIRE Expert Consultant for the Horizon Europe Centre of Excellence on Inclusive Gender Equality in Research and Innovation, and co-director of the centre for Action Research and Critical Inquiry in Organisations. Her research explores social inequalities especially ethics, politics, and difference in work and organisation and how they relate to social transformation and justice across multiple axes of oppression and precarity. She has a particular interest in craft work, affect, materiality and embodiment, and a longstanding interest in using critical perspectives to teach and research leadership. Her recent work has explored the role of networked feminism, activism, and digital cultures in the pursuit of social change.

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