

# Integrative and active character: University formation, citizen formation and aesthetic education

## Abstract

In every way, the integrative and active character in the university is increasingly necessary today. Knowledge, reason, and emotions must be viewed in this way. Alongside this, the active role of students in their educational endeavors and in society is becoming ever more important. Based on this, this text urges faculty, in the educational process, to pay greater attention to students' emotional well-being and to combat indifference, prioritizing the enrichment of their spiritual lives. It is recommended that, to achieve this goal, connections be established with citizenship formation and aesthetic education, some theoretical considerations of which are presented.

**Objective:** To highlight the importance of an integrative and active character in university formation.

**Conclusion:** Aesthetic education is a path to achieving this, because its ultimate goal is to cultivate sensitivity, a fundamental condition for advancing integration and student activism in university formation and its extension to society.

**Keywords:** integration, student activism, sensitivity, indifference, aesthetic education

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## Introduction

While it is true that new generations will be increasingly connected to the most powerful force of our time—knowledge—they must also be distinguished by the depth and breadth of their understanding, and by the speed with which they assimilate and utilize new knowledge. At the same time, they must stand out for their openness to diversity, which is already emerging as the defining characteristic of the society and culture that is developing. Cultivating this range of qualities is a process of increasing complexity, demanding openness and proactivity. Hence the fundamental importance of the integrative and active nature that must characterize university formation in these times and in the immediate future.

Various perspectives on university formation can be found in the specialized literature; the most prominent is the view that conceives of it as the creative process of training professionals.<sup>1,2</sup> In this literature, some authors refer to an integrative spirit, for example, in Berrón<sup>3</sup> and Capelari<sup>4</sup> although integration is often seen as limited, considering only the objectives, pathways, methods, and means. The category of integrative and active university formation focuses attention on the work aimed at training professionals who combine the qualities of their profession with other valuable qualities for society, as well as on the active role of students in their own educational process and in various social spheres, so that they become professionals committed to their context.

The aforementioned creative endeavor is linked to citizenship formation and aesthetic education; the former in fostering human beings who are participatory in society and active in defending their rights; the latter, in terms of sensitivity and its importance for enriching the human spiritual universe. Integrative and active university formation is a topic of great theoretical and practical richness, but in this work, the author only intends to contribute some ideas about how it can be achieved. To this end, he relied on bibliographic research and over forty years of experience in university teaching. Based on this, he understood that among the existing modalities, aesthetic education, conceived as a specialty linked to sensitivity, plays a prominent role.

Therefore, he defends the idea that one of the ways to achieve such education is through aesthetic education. The objective he pursued was to argue the value of aesthetic education for achieving integrative and active university formation.

This work is composed of three parts: the first addresses some theoretical aspects of integrative and active university formation; the second focuses on citizenship formation as a component of integrative and active university formation; and the third explores aesthetic education as a means for integrative and active university formation. The bibliography used is mostly recent publication and all is related to the topic, which is based on the ideas of the French philosopher Edgar Morin (1999).

## Some Ideas on integrative and active university formation

In the university context, formation can be understood as a system of relationships centered on faculty and students. These relationships exist in stages and levels and are aimed at developing new qualities and enhancing existing ones, in order to graduate highly qualified professionals who, meet specific historical and social needs and characteristics. University education today is linked to the digital environment; this has modified the availability and organization of knowledge and the teaching-learning process. The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has activated student participation in knowledge construction, strengthened the role of faculty as advisors and guides, and, as Sastoque et al.<sup>5</sup> state, made the teaching methods more important.

The conception of formation is of fundamental importance in any university institution; it shapes the principles, pathways, objectives, and direction of institutional activity. A fundamental aspect of this conception is the understanding of the human being; understanding them as a complex whole<sup>6</sup> is essential for thinking about formation with an integrative spirit that rejects unnecessary divisions. The foundation of the integrative and active perspective defended in this work lies in the ideas of Edgar Morin.<sup>7</sup>

The integrative spirit is, by its very nature, an openness to educational modalities that oppose unjustified and imposed fragmentation and division. Within this framework of education, pedagogical proposals such as Universal Design for Learning find a place, aimed at addressing “the individual needs of students and promoting equitable participation in the educational process”.<sup>8</sup> A first step in developing a quality university formation is to give due attention to the integration of reason and emotion. This objective has been addressed by many diverse scholars, but it needs to be given greater prominence in daily teaching practice, and the formative power of emotion must be recognized. To this end, teachers have tools provided by daily experience, such as reading texts that demonstrate fervor and encourage passion in solving problems inherent to a science, as well as those relevant to society.

The use of affectivity in educational activities has favorable conditions; first, because students are primarily prone to emotions, since they can respond to them with a simple click, and second, because they “contribute to generating long-term learning” (Bueno, 2020, p. 104), as they stem from preconscious behavioral patterns that are formed to give quick responses. At the same time, the motivations they generate contribute to better retention of what is learned. Díaz-Arce et al.<sup>9</sup> argue that they make it possible to classify experiences as positive or negative and to define what is attractive for learning; in this way, they help students see the educational process as what it truly is: an event to enjoy and celebrate. It is essential to strengthen the affective component.

These reflections do not intend to conceive of university formation as devoid of reasoning. This is impossible, because this human faculty is inherent in all our endeavors, and from it stems, for example, rigor, which is valuable in this work. It’s about strengthening the affective dimension by combining it with the rational. University formation would be incomplete if student engagement were not considered an essential component; that is, actively involving students in their professional development. It is worth including Esteban’s<sup>10</sup> reflection here that student engagement should not be a gift from the faculty, but rather the result of student effort and dedication, and that it should not undermine the role of teachers as “transmitters of knowledge” (p. 38). Teachers must remain at the forefront, while encouraging students to be proactive, creative, and willing to take charge of their professional development.

Such student engagement can be achieved in many ways; two widely and continuously used approaches in teaching are particularly relevant. One is participation in dialogues, because it encourages debate and invites the development and implementation of strategies to strengthen content awareness. Vergara<sup>11</sup> highlights it as an antidote to “neoliberal technocognitive, technocompetitive education” (p. 173). Nowadays, teachers are often invited by students to engage in dialogue; they should take advantage of this invitation and enrich the conversation, guiding it along the path the class needs and preventing digressions from the topic and the introduction of secondary or inappropriate themes. There’s no reason to dismiss or postpone students’ questions, even if they aren’t directly related to the content being covered. Dialogue fosters understanding, especially if it challenges the creativity of both students and teachers. Teachers, in the interest of engaging the conversation, shouldn’t prioritize just any topic, but rather those that contribute to the training of future professionals.

Another way to engage students is through the pursuit of knowledge. Teachers should use this to awaken their curiosity and cognitive interests, guiding them toward developing creativity and

finding effective, efficient, and sustainable solutions. The use of diversity is invaluable in this endeavor. Today, there is a growing recognition of diversity and, with it, of differences, as well as the right for these differences to exist. Teachers can take advantage of this situation in their educational work; for example, they can present students with different perspectives and encourage their integration within a field of knowledge fraught with contradictions and problems; they can also use questioning. In both cases, highlighting the diversity of understandings—both among authors and within the university faculty—regarding the appreciation of problems and solutions is of great educational value. An epistemological merit of the teacher is guiding students to understand that no criterion is infallible or eternal.

Another way to activate students’ cognitive abilities is through the relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge, which is of great importance in the development of teaching and scientific research, as highlighted by Alfaro et al.,<sup>12</sup> where one of the great tasks of the teaching staff is to teach students how to navigate the increasingly abundant information and to understand that this is a means to an end: to know the profession and the human being in depth.

In light of the integrative and active nature of university formation, great attention is given to ethics, especially to guide students toward a concern for society and its improvement. In this sense, it is similar to socio-formation: a Latin American approach that addresses the development of individuals within their social context. Its purpose “is to educate for sustainable social development through the undertaking of interconnected projects based on teaching, research, and community engagement”.<sup>13</sup> It also shares similarities with the concept that Valles and Parra<sup>14</sup> call new higher education, linked to the critical analysis of societal problems and the formulation of broader social objectives, such as human betterment: a perpetual and increasingly difficult task. One way to achieve this is to encourage students to take ownership of their own personal development, combining everyday knowledge with specialized knowledge.

Integrative and active university formation promotes a rationality open to the diversity of human life, aimed at overcoming disjunctive and reductive approaches and advancing toward knowledge obtained through distinction and conjunction to unite different areas of expertise. This approach embraces the unforeseen and uncertain, and views students in their multiple existential dimensions, with the intention that professionals can recognize and articulate polarities, discontinuities, and tensions. These reflections are similar to those of Saavedra and López<sup>15</sup> as the education under study must be characterized, among other features, by developing in each student the autonomy to take charge of their own development, the skill to contextualize, specify, and understand the complexity of human beings and their environment, and, in accordance with its integrative spirit, advance to higher levels of emancipation and human improvement.

In light of the integrative and active university formation, the aim is to train comprehensive professionals: with an optimal qualification, of high quality and socially active, responsible to society; in this sense it has similarity with the comprehensive education of the university student,<sup>16,17</sup> but this refers to completeness, while the other refers to integration. The social activism achieved through this educational approach is fundamentally designed to combat social indifference, which, according to Ospina<sup>18</sup> is a kind of “hallmark of our times, driven by politics, the economic system, and technological development” (p. 7), leading to individualism.

Indifference can exist in the academic world, where it may manifest as demotivation. Among its causes are the use of curricula that do not adapt to needs, do not stimulate critical thinking or

responsibility, and do not present students with new challenges and changes, including breaking free from subservience, fostering the construction of alternative logics that confront coloniality,<sup>19</sup> and respecting differences and diversity. This educational approach aims to develop in students an interest in society and the capacity to be critical and creative social actors, a purpose that implicitly includes the intention of educating them as citizens.

## Citizenship formation, a component of university formation

In previous paragraphs, we emphasized that the expected outcome of integrative and active university education is to provide society with well-rounded professionals, i.e., those who possess extensive knowledge in their field and other important qualities from both an individual and social perspective. In this latter respect, it is crucial that they develop a sense of responsibility toward society and actively contribute to it in every way. Citizenship Formation, conceived as a component of integrative and active university education, is essential to achieving this goal.

Citizenship Formation is fundamentally linked to the word “citizen,” which has several meanings. One refers to someone who is a native or resident of a city, but it also refers to a subject of political rights, including the right to participate in the government of the country and to interact with the State. This word leads to another: citizenship, which primarily refers to the quality of being a citizen and its associated rights, the behavior that society recognizes citizens should have, and the body of citizens of a town or nation. The use of these terms invites us to distinguish between the civic and civil dimensions. The former is understood in relation to politics and political institutions; the latter, although often used in opposition to the military, concerns coexistence within a community and identity—the sense of belonging to it.

This interplay of meanings can result in citizenship formation being understood only as related to the State, rather than as a systematic and intentional process of socialization. Its objective is to empower individuals to be citizens in the broadest sense of the word, meaning active participants in society, with the opportunity to fully engage in its activities. Today, citizenship formation must prepare individuals to embrace “the plurality of identities, diversity, and otherness as characteristics of contemporary democracy.”<sup>20</sup> Based on the above, it is easy to understand that citizenship formation, first and foremost, aims to cultivate citizens—that is, individuals who are responsible for their place and role in society and who are socially active. From this perspective, the essential links that exist between it and integrative and active university education are understandable.

In the university context, citizenship formation can be a standalone subject or a cross-cutting theme considered in the teaching of various specializations. In either case, its objective should be to help graduates develop an interest in the social environment in which they live: their local community, their country, and the planet Earth as a whole. The intention is to train students as professionals willing to benefit humanity. This quality fosters a strong connection with values such as responsibility and solidarity, and encourages participation in the community. As Rivera and Sánchez<sup>21</sup> point out, the goal is for professionals to identify with their environment and with coexistence.

It might be thought that the objectives of the citizenship formation process are clear, well-known, and unnecessary to reiterate, among which stand out knowledge of society, the State and its laws, as well as the promotion of sociopolitical activism. However, as Zúñiga et

al.<sup>22</sup> point out, it is necessary to rethink the tools with which it should be carried out, particularly in university institutions and even more so in teaching, so that it can be deployed in an attractive and enjoyable way and thus be a bridge between the university and the community and a way to strengthen democracy.

One purpose of citizenship formation at the university level is to encourage students to participate more actively in various societal processes, including the real possibility of making decisions within them. In this endeavor, responsible critical reflection is crucial, as is the goal of enabling each student to discern between positive and negative actions and make their own decisions, so that they possess these qualities when they become professionals.

A fundamental aim of university formation should be that graduates are capable of reflecting and acting knowledgeably, consciously, and according to their own convictions. This purpose implies that citizenship formation is not merely a system of actions designed to equip students with the aforementioned knowledge, combined with that of their specific profession. It is worth emphasizing that such a system is highly valuable, but alongside it, and as an integral part of it, the development of other characteristics in students must be fostered so that in the future they will emerge not only as good professionals, but also as citizens and, even more importantly, as human beings with superior qualities, willing and prepared to transform the world in order to increase the well-being of humanity.

As González-Quintero and Gómez-Rodríguez<sup>23</sup> emphasize, citizenship formation must be an essential component of university formation and respond to the demands of society, prevailing laws, and norms of coexistence; it must be conceived as a complex and comprehensive process, whose content and characteristics reflect historical conditions and are related to the university’s social responsibility, aimed, above all, at defending human rights, democracy, and social justice.

In citizenship formation, it is essential to keep in mind at all times the individualities and diversity, especially if it refers to a subject called Citizenship Formation,<sup>24</sup> whose program and planning, as Ojeda and Zúñiga<sup>25</sup> and Molina et al.<sup>26</sup> point out, must be increasingly participatory, especially that the teachers create them based on the criteria and interests of the students and thus, as Ibarra et al.<sup>27</sup> point out, include the students’ vision about the institution and society.

There is a growing recognition of the importance of citizenship formation in universities. One example is the implementation at the University of Havana of the scientific research project “Citizenship Formation Strategy for Higher Education Professionals as a Contribution to their Comprehensive Formation” (code PS223LH002-001), which seeks to delve deeper into the theory of citizen formation and its development within the university setting. This interest has also grown in other Cuban universities, such as the University of Ciego de Ávila, where a group of professors<sup>23</sup> has investigated the topic and its relationship to contemporary society.

Integrative and active university formation offers the potential to establish diverse connections with citizenship formation, but it’s crucial to remember that this network of relationships develops not throughout society as a whole, but specifically within the university context, with its unique characteristics, where faculty members face a vast array of paths and options. The question then becomes: which path and modality to select, and how to utilize them? This depends on many factors, including the objectives and the specific circumstances. However, both approaches, whether pursued independently or collaboratively, must not be limited to the purely rational, but must

also embrace the affective dimension and, moreover, integrate them to achieve deeper and broader results. To achieve this goal, faculty can unleash their creativity and employ, in whatever way they deem appropriate, all the resources available to them. Among these resources is a method that receives less attention than it deserves, yet possesses incalculable potential for these purposes: aesthetic education.

### An approach to aesthetic education as a path to integrative and active university formation

As we highlighted in previous paragraphs, the essence of integrative and active university education lies in the objective of developing well-rounded professionals. However, it is not enough for them to possess the broadest and deepest knowledge of their specialty, nor is it enough for them to understand the need to participate in solving society's problems. All of this lacks a crucial element that acts as a bridge: sensitivity. This sensitivity can be stimulated and shaped through a philosophical field of knowledge: Aesthetics. Since what is needed is to stimulate and shape sensitivity, what is necessary is education; therefore, we speak of aesthetic education, rather than aesthetic training. Thus, we conceive of aesthetic education as a complement to integrative and active university education, as a component of that education.

To continue with the logic followed in this work, the category of aesthetic training should be used instead of aesthetic education. However, the aim is not to train a specialist or scholar of aesthetics, but rather to aesthetically shape those who are influenced by it. Nevertheless, it is possible to develop formative work with aesthetics; through it, for example, one can cultivate students' aesthetic taste, although what is truly being done is shaping it.

Aesthetic education, as Estévez<sup>28</sup> states, is conceived in various ways; however, if we consider the history and essence of the discipline, its specificity lies in aesthetically shaping the relationships of human beings with the artificial and the natural, the corporeal and the incorporeal, the existing and the imagined.

The aforementioned characteristic demonstrates that aesthetics extends beyond works of art and literature, possessing universality, which denotes its philosophical essence. Reductionists have sought to suppress this universality by limiting it to such works, thereby reducing the aesthetic to the artistic and aesthetic education to art education or art appreciation. Presol and Pérez<sup>29</sup> exemplify this, as their aesthetic study focuses on the artwork itself, based on style and technique. This is not an error, because art and the relationship between beauty and ugliness underlie these reflections, providing a foundation for other aesthetic categories. However, a specific aesthetic study is not the same as conceiving of aesthetics solely as linked to art and literature. A similar approach is taken by Merlos<sup>30</sup> who limits the aesthetic to artistic manifestations.

Reductionism in aesthetics can also be found when it is observed exclusively linked to beauty, its use and evaluation, and ugliness is forgotten: its dialectical counterpart, as well as other categories in the study of artistic and literary works: the grotesque, the sublime, the ridiculous, among others that arise depending on human activity and creativity, which may or may not be basically related to art and literature, but which have essential links with the beautiful and the ugly and with the sensitivity that responds to them.

The basic axis of aesthetics is formed by beauty and ugliness, but sensitivity is inherent to it, to the entire categorical framework of this area of knowledge, and to the education that stems from it. This view aligns with that of the French historian of philosophy Raymond Bayer

(1898-1959), who states that the word "aesthetics" appeared in the 18th century "when it was used by Baumgarten (1714-1762), and even then, it meant nothing more than 'theory of sensibility,' according to the etymology of the Greek term *aisthesis*".<sup>31</sup>

Bayer<sup>31</sup> states that Baumgarten published the two parts of his work *Aesthetica* between 1750 and 1758. In the first part, he conceives of aesthetics as the science of sensory knowledge and maintains that the perfection of this knowledge is beauty. In the second part, he discusses practical aesthetics, centered on poetic creation as a manifestation of artistic creativity. Regarding this, he emphasizes subjective conditions, such as the soul's disposition to have beautiful thoughts, although he acknowledges that there is an organic element involved, linked to the senses of sight and hearing, from which "sensibility results" (p. 185). Thus, aesthetics can be understood in relation to artistic activity and its fruits, as well as to beauty and its dialectical opposite: ugliness, and, even more importantly, to sensibility.

In Spanish the word *sensibilidad* (sensitivity) has several meanings, first and foremost the faculty of feeling: a property of living beings, which in humans is a complex process, combined with reasoning, although it maintains, albeit modified, the immediacy inherent in other biological organisms. The term also alludes to the tendency to act guided by tenderness and compassion; this meaning opens the way to another way of understanding it: it is linked to feelings, emotions, and passions, that is, it is equated with affectivity.

Human beings perceive as much as they can; through this capacity, they are directly directed toward knowing and, at the same time, valuing, enjoying or rejecting, and creating or transforming, according to their needs. In this network of actions and reactions, they reveal themselves as rational beings, but also as sensitive beings, because they display emotions, feelings, and passions, which act upon other psychic contents.<sup>32</sup> All are important, because "the human is constituted in the intertwining of the emotional with the rational".<sup>33</sup> This universe has great value for education.

Why consider these themes in light of an integrative and active university formation? At the root of affectivity lie pleasure and displeasure, and at the foundation of these lie beauty and ugliness.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the affective realm, and with-it sensitivity, is central to the universe of aesthetic education. Moreover, today there is a clear preference for the bland and the vulgar, and alongside this, indifference is growing, especially toward ideas and events that breed hatred and discrimination or that hinder and distort human potential. All of this denotes an impoverishment of the spiritual realm, and it is urgent to halt this trend and reverse it through spiritual enrichment, which, when properly understood, would correspond to the human achievements of our time, resulting primarily from science and technology. If aesthetic education is viewed as the education of sensibility, it possesses incalculable formative value, even if in this case it is seen only as aesthetic sensibility and thus linked to the axis constituted by beauty and ugliness.

It is simply necessary to appreciate, in due measure, the capacity of aesthetics to shape sensibilities and thus, as Galak and Southwell<sup>35</sup> affirm, to try to "reorder sensations, valuations, and moralities in certain sensibilities, producing a 'sentimental education' from the formation of subjectivities" (p. 3). Aesthetic education molds the capacity to rejoice; it is not about imposing models, but about stimulating sensibility, opening it up and diversifying it.

In aesthetic education, the affective dimension is prominent, but knowledge is also taught and applied both affectively and rationally. Sensitivity does not undermine the latter; it does not necessarily cause

the disappearance of highly valued qualities in the use of reason, such as objectivity, certainty, awareness of the era, and cultural specificities. Rather, it is a means by which feelings and reason are integrated, opening up possibilities for enriching the spiritual universe. The word “sensitivity” also refers to the human capacity to be spiritually altered and to express feelings of attraction or repulsion. This meaning is emphasized because by focusing education on sensitivity, the aim is also to combat insensitivity, understood not only as harshness, but above all as indifference.

Aesthetic education, viewed broadly and diversely, must be present in all aspects of university education, including civic education. Its objective is to awaken and shape students’ sensitivity, not only to guide them toward a more expansive enjoyment of life, but also to foster spiritual growth and, indeed, human improvement through the integration of reason and emotion. This, in turn, leads to higher levels of professional development. For aesthetic education to be effective, it must be continuous and systematic. This allows progress toward the goal of teaching how to feel, as Suárez<sup>36</sup> indicates. Furthermore, shaping affectivity must be guided to ensure that future professionals are sensitive to human improvement. Integrative and active university education is an invitation to integrate what is fragmented and separate within the university and to empower students to become professionals and citizens who work toward a more humane world.

In implementing aesthetic education, two aspects must be considered. The first, and essential, is that the teacher must commit to educating students aesthetically, which is a difficult task. It requires optimism, cannot be completed by the work of a single teacher, or even a group of teachers, results are not always immediate, and it is difficult to measure the level of human sensitivity that students are developing. The second is that it cannot be improvised; the aesthetic-educational process must be planned. This process cannot be conceived as a specific subject or as an essential part of a subject, as it must be integrated into all teaching and educational activities, across all subjects. After all, can the relationship between beauty and ugliness not be found in mathematics?

To implement aesthetic education, the first requirement is that the teacher intend to do so. If they have this interest, they can follow these steps: 1- determine the aesthetic potential of the subject, that is, what can be naturally drawn from it; 2- explore the students’ level of aesthetic sensitivity to form aesthetic judgments (this can be done through questions or dilemmas); 3- determine the aesthetic potential of the environment (sociocultural context, flora, fauna, climate, topography); 4- in accordance with the students and the environment, plan curricular and extracurricular activities (more complex dilemmas than those mentioned above, or tasks to be completed independently or in preparation for seminars). These teachers should not be confused with scholars and experts in art, literature, or philosophical aesthetics. The subject of Philosophical Aesthetics is taught in only a few university degree programs. What needs to be done is to increase strategies aimed at increasing the creative and systematic use of procedures that facilitate direct contact between students and objects that possess aesthetic values.<sup>37</sup>

The integrative and active character of university education, and, based on it, the integration of civic education and aesthetic education into university education, have, as a complex whole, a long way to go, where the intention to curb indifference and transform it into social interest and solidarity stands out. In this work, it is necessary to keep in mind social changes, including the recognition of the diversity of interests and ways to achieve them, as well as the implementation of policies that do not always benefit the desire to make university education an integrative and active whole. At the same time, it is

necessary to pay special attention to the presence of technology in the university, specifically information and communication technologies and artificial intelligence, which have repercussions in different ways, not always positive, where social responsibility and sensitivity to new circumstances and those already visible from afar have a significant place.

## Conclusion

Integrative and active university education aligns with the integrative spirit gaining strength in contemporary human society and with the increasingly active role students are assuming in the educational process. By strengthening ties with civic education, student activism gains avenues to transcend the academic process and encompass the broader social context. Aesthetic education offers significant potential for achieving this type of education, as it is based on the pleasing-displeasing relationship manifested in the essential connections between beauty and ugliness, from which its ultimate goal—educating sensitivity—derives its core purpose. This aligns with a key objective of the educational framework: to reinforce sensitivity in order to advance integration and student activism within the university setting and its extension into society. The essential purpose of the preceding reflections is not only to train professionals with the best qualities attainable under current historical conditions, but also to develop human beings with high professional and human qualities. Integrative and active university formation, complemented by citizenship formation and aesthetic education, is itself a form of human formation.

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## Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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