

Community Colleges in Nepal and the Quest for Sustainability: Challenges, Prospects and SDG Alignment

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Abstract

Sustainable development is a movement toward improving the world, not just a passing trend . In Nepal, universities and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have yet to effectively fulfill their responsibility to promote sustainability . This study explores the sustainability perception of higher education (HE) by community-based HEIs, i.e., community colleges . A literature review indicates the benefits and threats of sustainability consciousness which is supplemented by primary and secondary data collected through interviews with high-ranking UGC and university officials and former Chairpersons of the Nepal Public Campus Association (NPCA) . The thematic analysis reveals that community colleges of Nepal are facing their identity crisis and struggling for their own sustainability with implications to fulfill the SDGs . Lack of uniform regulations, absence of sustainability-friendly curricula, declining student enrollment, ineffective management, conventional pedagogy, inadequate and poor research activities, unstable human resources, insufficient financial support, and inadequate eco-friendly infrastructure stand as key challenges . However, prospects are there that quality accredited community colleges can foster sustained growth by ensuring accessible, high-quality education along with strong leadership, governance, and community involvement . Their expected role in mitigating global warming, promoting gender equity, reducing carbon emissions, and bridging educational gaps

makes them highly visible to achieving SDGs . This study recommends some strategic measures for addressing sustainability challenges, paving the way for making Nepal a more prosperous and sustainable country in the days to come.

Keywords: *Eco-friendly infrastructure, Identity crisis, Ineffective management, SDGs, Sustainability .*

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) General Assembly set up seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, seeking to "ensure a sustainable, peaceful, prosperous, and equitable life on earth for all, both now and in the future." Key policy papers, like the current 15th development plan and the 25year long-term vision-2100, have underlined Nepal's early commitment to the SDGs (United Nation Development Program, 2019) .

In Nepal, numerous institutions, including colleges and universities, are actively pursuing the SDGs in a variety of fields . In order to ensure Nepal's progress toward SDG targets, Renaud Meyer, the UNDP Nepal Resident Representative, emphasized the importance of tackling socio-economic and geographic imbalances (UNDP, 2019 a) . The former finance minister of Nepal also emphasized the importance of international cooperation in attaining sustainable development by Nepal . Additionally, the National Innovation Center, Nepal's Chairperson, in the same (UNDP, 2019) report, has underlined the importance of adopting innovation-driven approaches to inclusive development in these words, "We cannot overlook the necessity of change" . Further, he explained that Nepal needs to embrace innovation and new tactics for everybody's growth and prosperity (UNDP, 2019 b) . The degree of SDG implementation varies from country to country but it is clear that HEIs can promote an attitude that encourages the spread of SDG values . As indicated by Zaleniene & Pereira (2021), universities and colleges can significantly contribute to achieving several SDGs, including Goal 1 (No poverty), Goal 3 (promoting health and well-being), Goal 4 (Quality Education), Goal 5 (achieving gender equality), Goal 8 (fostering decent work and economic growth), Goal 12 (advocating responsible consumption and production), Goal 13 (combating climate change), and Goal 16 (strengthening peace, justice, and institutions).

In Nepal, community colleges, which are spread across 73 of 77 districts (NPCA, 2025), are essential institutions to accomplishing the SDGs and developing the country's future leaders . They have the power to change students' attitude and promote a sustainable community . It is essential to incorporate the concept of sustainability into institutional operations and curricula . Universities need to take the lead in advancing curriculum, energy conservation, and waste reduction, creating an awareness about climate change and gender equality, and monitoring HEIs for quality education . Several barriers

to such efforts are being faced by Nepalese universities and HEIs from stakeholders such as staff, faculty, and students as senior university administrators frequently don't have enough time to concentrate on their jobs, duties, and the general growth of their organization . Political influences, stakeholders' interests, and institutional hurdles are the other factors that further impede the progress . Improvement of sustainability impact of higher education and promoting long-term social change are such issues that call for concerted efforts to successfully resolve them(Žalėnienė, 2021) . The NEHEP program of UGC supports SDGs implementation in Nepal through the HEIs, particularly community colleges . It has established metrics to improve research, encourage innovation, and reform curriculum . HEIs emphasize environmental sustainability and are preparing students to contribute to society . Cultural management, instruction, research, student growth, and environmental and societal sustainability are all given top priority in the education sector (Thakkar, 2022) . There are 20 universities, 4 provincial universities, 7 medical academies, and 1,432 institutions in Nepal that offer higher education (UGC, 2024) . There are four types of colleges: private, community, constituent, and foreign-affiliated . Located mostly in rural areas, community colleges account for 37.04% of all institutions and enroll 30% of students, with 66.33% of them being female . Seventy five colleges out of a total of 105 accredited HEIs are community colleges, which are capable enough to providing comprehensive, equitable, and quality education while also supporting sustainability objectives (University Grants Commission, 2024) . In Nepal, community colleges offer reasonably priced, easily accessible higher education, particularly in rural areas . Popularly known as *Chori Buhari* colleges, 66.33% of their students are female and they cater to the underrepresented populations . Even though they advocate for inclusivity, they still have to deal with the issues of low funding, outmoded teaching techniques, dependency on government subsidies, and poor facilities (Chimoriya, 2024).

Education increases economic growth, lowers inequality, and gives people more power . Quality education from early childhood to lifelong learning is essential to achieving the SDGs . Meeting SDG 4, requires policies that provide equitable access, particularly for girls and children with disabilities, as well as improved teacher training facility along with stronger infrastructures . The goal of increasing digital access in education is to overcome learning gaps by improving teacher preparation, enhancing digital literacy, connecting schools to the internet, and allocating funds for specific education initiatives (UNDP, 2025).

As the least developed nation situated between China and India, Nepal is largely dependent on foreign loans for its development, particularly in the field of HE . Funding for reforms has been provided since it joined the World Bank (WB) in 1961 . Growth was hampered by conflict (1996-2006), which came to an end with the 2006 peace

agreement . The terrible earthquake -2015 and Nepal's transition to federalism increased the country's economic fragility . Due to perceived quality disparities in higher education, the crisis has forced many students to study overseas, making the sector's sustainability even more difficult (World Bank Group, 2015) . During the 1980s and 1990s, WB's investments in education were mostly limited to primary and secondary levels . After 2000s, WB provided a US \$60 million loan for the Second Higher Education Project (SHEP) (2007–2014) with an aim to improve the quality and relevance of HE and to increase the access for underserved groups and also to enhance the financial sustainability of HEIs (Regmi, 2016) . However, some programs use foreign loans to assist HEIs . The Higher Education Reform Project (2015–2020) received a loan from the WB in 2015, with \$ 65 million added later . While guaranteeing equitable access for underprivileged students, the project seeks to improve quality, relevance, and efficiency of HE . Enhancing community funding, increasing accreditation, boosting institutional autonomy, fortifying exams, growing programs and research, and providing financial aid to disadvantaged students are some of the major adjustments (Gaulee, 2018) . The NEHEP program was introduced by UGC and MOE on October 26, 2021, and it helps HEIs in Nepal maintain their financial viability . It encourages research and innovation while improving access, quality, and relevance to the labor market for marginalized populations . The program expands and develops Nepal's higher education sector by building on previous reforms (UGC, 2021) . Nepal has spent NRs . 1.4 trillion on higher education during the last ten years (UGC, 2024) . Nevertheless, after Grade 12, many students depart for study abroad programs . A total of 416,364 students were granted no objection certificates (NOCs) to pursue higher education abroad between FY 2065/66 and 2077/78 BS (Rauniyar, 2023) . In the same news, she further mentioned that during the (2078–2079) academic year, 227,780 students received the NOCs . Nepal continues to face challenges such as policy quandaries, unchecked university expansion, unsustainable enrollment growth, inadequate funding, poor management, illogical governance, and deteriorating quality standards in HE, despite advancements since the National Education System Plan of the 1970s (Rauniyar, 2023).

The community colleges in Nepal face persistent financial challenges despite government investment and loans . The absence of uniform regulations hinders streamlined operations, while the demand for technological advancements and digital literacy outpace the available resources (Shrestha & Adhikari, 2021) . Rural institutions struggle with faculty retention and student enrollment, exacerbating educational disparities . Additionally, global sustainability goals require these colleges to integrate green practices, further complicating their operations (UNESCO, 2022).

Addressing these issues is crucial for aligning community colleges with SDGs . Former NPCA chairpersons identified low enrollment, high dropout rates, poor infrastructure,

and limited academic programs as key challenges . They emphasized the need for sustainable development through access and inclusiveness, quality education, adequate financing, community participation, student support services, environmental education, and lifelong learning . These interconnected pillars of education ensure academic, administrative, social, and economic sustainability, reinforcing community colleges as key drivers of equitable and resilient higher education in Nepal.

This study therefore explores difficulties community colleges encounter while incorporating sustainability, emphasizing the necessity for creative approaches . Their ability is hampered by outdated curricula, scarce resources, and inadequate teacher preparation . To address these, it is necessary to invest in teacher training, improve instructional strategies, and update learning materials . By removing these obstacles, universities will be able to teach sustainable development principles in a way that is in line with both domestic and international interests (Bhandari D . B., 2003) . The following are the major objectives of this article focusing on the areas:

- (a) Explore the main sustainability issues facing community colleges, such as declining enrollment, regulatory gaps, and financial instability .
- (b) Evaluate how accessible education, gender parity, and community involvement contribute to sustainable development, and
- (c) Suggest strategic recommendations for curriculum innovation, governance enhancements, and policy reforms to improve long-term resilience and SDG alignment.

Taking insight from the available literature, this article delves into the sustainability challenges faced by community colleges in Nepal by addressing them . Community colleges can strengthen their contributions to equitable, accessible, quality and inclusive education and ensure their resilience in a dynamic educational landscape.

Methods

A mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative techniques was employed in the study . Existing literature, including books, journals, policy documents, and reports related to HE and its sustainability in Nepal, was extensively reviewed through desk research to identify knowledge gaps and establish a foundation for understanding the challenges . The reviewed literatures were systematically analyzed to categorize recurring themes and patterns, such as financial constraints, governance issues, and infrastructure inadequacies . A focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted with the former president of NPCA to gain in-depth insights into real-world challenges, regional disparities, and stakeholders' perceptions . Additionally,

interviews with key informants, such as the UGC & TU high officials, policy makers were carried out to record detailed perspectives on sustainability challenges and potential solutions . Data obtained from desk reviews, FGDs, and interviews were cross verified using triangulation process to ensure reliability and validity . Qualitative data analysis was used to identify recurring themes and challenges, offering a nuanced understanding of sustainability issues faced by the community colleges.

Results and Discussions

Community colleges in Nepal are fraught with sustainability challenges such as inconsistent college regulations, unstable finances, dwindling student enrollment, poor facilities, and ineffective institutional management . Increasing access to fair education, encouraging gender equity, and community involvement, the community colleges are trying to support sustainable development despite the challenges they are confronted with . Quality, affordability, and relevance as well as resilience in education requires strategic changes in curricular innovation, governance, and policy frameworks of the HEIs . Improved finance models and institutional capacity building are essential for bringing these institutions into line with the global SDG agenda and guaranteeing their long-term viability and societal impact.

Gender Parity Index (GPI)

Table 1

Gender Parity Index (GPI) in Higher Education Enrollment

	Female	Male	Total
Gross enrollment	274913	358140	633053
Nepal population (19-22) *	1544855	1455843	3000698
Percentage of enrollment	17.8	24.6	
GPI	1.3		

Source: National Population Census (2021)

The statistics in table . 1 shows gender pattern in higher education enrollment in Nepal . Although males make up a somewhat bigger population in the (18-22) age range (1,544,855 males vs . 1,455,843 girls), females out number males in higher education enrollment, with 358,140 females enrolling compared to 274,913 males . This means that 24.6% of girls in this age group are enrolled in higher education, which is much higher than the 17.8% enrollment rate among males . The Gender Parity Index (GPI) of 1.3 reinforces this trend, indicating that for every male enrolled, there are 1.3 girls . These numbers show a significant change toward female predominance in higher education enrollment, despite their slightly lower population in the relevant age range.

Gender in Community Colleges

Despite Nepal's commitment to gender equality in its 15th development plan, gender disparity remains a significant challenge (UN Women, 2022). The Global Gender Gap Index indicates a decline in women's economic participation and educational attainment from 2006 to 2020, despite gains in political representation (World Economic Forum, 2021). This underscores persistent gender inequalities in higher education (Shrestha, 2023).

Community colleges play a pivotal role in bridging this gap by providing accessible education and fostering gender equality. Former Vice-Chancellor of Pokhara University and former NPCA Chairperson, emphasized that societal barriers, particularly in rural areas, continue to limit women's access to higher education. Similarly, another former NPCA Chairperson, highlighted that while female enrollment is increasing, financial constraints, time limitations, and a lack of leadership opportunities still hinder progress. To ensure inclusive education, community colleges must implement scholarships, flexible learning schedules, and mentorship programs to empower women. Sustainable gender parity extends beyond enrollment requiring an equitable academic environment to enable women to excel and assume leadership roles. Strengthening policies focused on women's scholarships and leadership training can further bridge this gap. Community colleges, often referred to as "*Xori Buhari Colleges*," serve as crucial institutions for advancing gender-balanced education, particularly in rural areas. Aligning with SDGs, these colleges must continue their fight in removing systemic barriers and fostering equitable learning spaces, ensuring a sustainable future through inclusive higher education.

Table 2

Gender-wise Student Enrollment in Three Different Types of Campuses

Campus Type	Male	Female	Total	Share
Constituent	115774	122076	237850	37.6%
Community	67440	136790	204230	32.3%
Private	91699	99274	190973	30.2%

Source: UGC- EMIS Report (2023-2024)

The above table shows gender-wise student enrollment across three campus types: Community, Constituent, and Private. Constituent campuses have the highest enrollment, with 237,850 students (37.6%) of the total, closely followed by community campuses with 204,230 students (32.3%), and private campuses with 190,974 students (30.2%). Female enrollment is higher in community and private campuses, while constituent campuses have a more balanced gender distribution, with a slightly higher male enrollment.

Access to Higher Education

Nepal has currently 20 universities, four health academies, and 1,432 HEIs (UGC, 2024) providing higher education . While expanding access to HE remains a challenge, ensuring quality, market relevance, and alignment with national development goals is equally critical . To understand the sustainability challenges faced by community colleges, personal interviews were conducted with five former chairpersons of the Nepal Public Campus Association (NPCA).

According to the 1st former NPCA chairperson, community colleges play a crucial role in providing access, affordability, and quality education . These institutions educate one-third of all higher education students in Nepal, yet they face sustainability challenges, including an ongoing identity crisis . The 2nd former NPCA chairperson emphasized that community colleges operate in 73 out of 77 districts, reaching the underserved areas and significantly contributing to SDGs-4: ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education . Similarly, the 3rd former chairperson highlighted that without community colleges, many Nepalese would be deprived of higher education . He stressed that the government must fulfill its financial responsibility to sustain these institutions . Similarly, the 4th former NPCA chairperson noted that community colleges serve as a critical support system, offering quality education at affordable rates, particularly benefiting women, thereby advancing gender equality under SDGs- 5 . The final 5th former NPCA chairperson remarked that community colleges not only ensure access but also maintain the quality of higher education while operating on a participatory model . Since the government alone cannot bear the financial burden of higher education, community colleges play a vital role in fostering sustainable, inclusive growth, aligning with all 17 SDGs including the promotion of partnerships for sustainable development (Personal communication, January 4, 2025) . Thus, strengthening community colleges through strategic funding, policy reforms, and partnerships is essential for achieving Nepal's educational and sustainability goals.

The Status of Higher Education Institutions

The three natural regions of Nepal: the Terai (20%), hills (56%), and mountains (24%), influence the distribution of access to higher education . Community colleges are providing inclusive, inexpensive higher education in line with environmental goals, through participatory governance, being accountable, transparent, and locally responsible . Trends in student enrollment and the distribution of HEIs are presented in the table below.

Table 3*Number of HEIs in Nepal*

Provinces/ Type	Constituent	Community	Private	Total
Koshi	28	90	87	205(14.32%)
Madhesh	11	43	69	123(8.59%)
Bagmati	44	167	413	624(43.58%)
Gandaki	19	66	43	128(8.94%)
Lumbini	21	100	79	200(13.97%)
Karnali	19	29	10	58(4.95%)
Sudurpaschim	22	50	22	94(6.56%)
Total	164 (11.4%)	545(38.06%)	723 (50.49%)	1432(100%)

Source: UGC EMIS Report (2023-2024)

The table emphasizes how important community colleges are to the expansion of affordable higher education, especially in rural areas with few private and constituent HEIs. Community colleges (29 in Karnali) are higher in number than private ones (10) and constituent colleges 19, guaranteeing accessibility to underprivileged areas supporting SDGs 4 (Quality Education) and SDGs 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Although private HEIs are more prevalent in urban areas like Bagmati (43.58%), community colleges (167 colleges) continue to provide inclusive education. Their participatory governance encourages accountability, openness, and the development of local capability, all of which support sustainability in higher education. Community colleges help achieve SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by reducing and removing financial and geographic barriers and giving students employable skills, making them important drivers of equitable and sustainable education in Nepal.

Table 4*Change in the Number of HEIs from 2016/17 to 2023/24*

Type/Year	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Constituent	99	137	147	152	150	162	164
Community	532	508	538	536	537	539	545
Private	777	780	747	749	753	754	723
Total	1,408	1,425	1,432	1,437	1,440	1,455	1,432

Source: UGC EMIS Report (2023-2024)

The table indicates that the number of constituent colleges has increased from 99 to 164, which puts additional financial burden on the Government of Nepal . Since the various reports show that the government alone cannot meet all the costs of higher education, low-cost community colleges (38.06%) should receive higher subsidies to ensure affordability and sustainability (SDG 4: Quality Education) in HE . Despite their dominance, private HEIs are declining (777 to 723), indicating a growing demand for public and community colleges . To ensure long-term sustainability (SDG 8: Decent Work, SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities), government support for community colleges is deemed essential to strike a balance between financial efficiency and ensuring increased access to high-quality higher education.

Financial Sustainability

There is minimal basic data available, excluding literacy rates, despite Nepal's 2021 census . Adult literacy rates are 59.72% for women and 67.91%–78.59% for males, according to UNESCO . Although education accounts for 4.4% of Nepal's GDP, improvements in higher education are still progressing slowly . In 2020, public investment on education was only 13.19 percent, well below the 20% objective, indicating ongoing underfunding . Innovation is hampered by the low level of government expenditure in research and development . Nepal must prioritize R&D, expedite reforms, and increase financing of education in order to promote long-term socioeconomic progress in line with sustainability goals . (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024).

Community colleges' financial viability to be in line with SDGs 4 (Quality Education) and SDGs 10 (Reduced Inequalities) is a significant challenge . Government funding is essential for these colleges, which educate about one third students from underprivileged and isolated locations . Since 505 HEIs have fewer than 100 students, it is challenging for them to be financially sustainable without mergers and more government financing for the recognized colleges . Education experts have emphasized that maintaining community colleges calls for cooperation coordination between the national, provincial, and local governments . Although community colleges are offering comprehensive and reasonably priced education, financial limitations pose a threat to their continued existence . The feared failure to continue providing quality education to underrepresented groups in the absence of sufficient government funding points out critically the need for developing financial sustainability policies in order to safeguard their future . The importance of these issues is shown in the table below .

Table 3*Education Budget and NOC Status*

FY in AD	Budget in Education	NOC taken
2024/25	2.003066 trillion	
2023/24	197 billions	112,593
2022/23	196 billions	110,217
2021/22	180 billions	117,563
2020/21	171 billions	279,78
2019/20	163 billions	340,94
2018/19	134 billions	632,59
2017/18	99 billions	587,58
2016/17	87 billions	506,59
2015/16	80 billions	324,89

Source: Budget book (2015 to 2024), Ministry of Finance

This table shows that the education budget in Nepal has steadily increased, reaching NPR 2.003066 trillion in FY 2024/25, a significant rise from NPR 197 billion in FY 2023/24 and NPR 80 billion in FY 2015/16 . Despite this financial boost, the number of students obtaining 'No Objection Certificates' (NOCs) to study abroad remains high . In FY 2023/24, 112,593 students applied for NOCs, reflecting a persistent outflow of young talent . While COVID-19 caused a temporary decline in NOCs in FY 2019/20 and FY 2020/21, the outgoing numbers rebounded sharply, highlighting gaps in Nepal's higher education system . The expected surge in investment must reduce this trend, indicating a lag in policy effectiveness . Sustainable development in education requires not just funding but also improvements in quality, infrastructure, and employability situation . To address this challenge, the Nepalese government has set an ambitious goal to establish the country as an IT hub, targeting NPR 3,000 billion in IT exports and creating 1.5 million jobs over the next decade (NBSM Consulting Pvt Ltd, 2024-25). This initiative aims to retain students by offering competitive opportunities within Nepal . Sustainability in higher education hinges on strengthening local institutions, improving job prospects, and aligning education with industry demands . Increasing enrollment in community colleges and universities, coupled with skill-oriented programs, is therefore vital for reducing the dependency on foreign education and ensuring long-term national growth.

Sustainability Challenges and Way Forward

Community colleges in Nepal face significant sustainability challenges, as highlighted by former NPCA chairpersons and officials from UGC and TU . The key concerns include misaligned curricula, outdated teaching methods, inadequate infrastructure, and limited job opportunities for graduates . Financial constraints, inconsistent governance, and faculty retention issues have further challenged the higher education system . The long-term visibility of community colleges and the nation's ability to retain young talent will be threatened in the absence of sound and dedicated reforms in higher education system . Financial instability causing unreliable funding mechanisms hinder infrastructure expansion, digital integration, and program enhancement . Limited resources also restrict outreach efforts, preventing equitable education access for the marginalized populations . Without adequate investment, these colleges struggle to offer competitive salaries and professional development, leading to qualified faculty shortage and their retention.

Declining enrollment and a perception of lower-quality education further exacerbate sustainability threats . A lack of new academic programs, modern infrastructure, digital tools, and research facilities pushes students toward institutions abroad . Over-reliance on rote learning limits innovation, prompting students to seek interactive and industry-relevant education elsewhere . Poor governance and inconsistent higher education policies reduce operational efficiency, preventing colleges from adapting to workforce demands . To align with sustainability goals, Nepal must establish a unified regulatory policy framework, enhance digital infrastructure, and integrate market-driven skills into curricula or introduce the new academic programs . Strengthening faculty development and ensuring financial sustainability are crucial for ensuring long-term success of the HEIs . The government's vision to transform Nepal into an IT hub presents an opportunity to retain young talent by creating local job opportunities . Addressing these challenges through policy reforms and strategic investments is essential for sustainable higher education.

Conclusion

Community colleges in Nepal face significant sustainability challenges, primarily financial instability, governance inefficiencies, and outdated infrastructure . Despite playing a crucial role in expanding access to affordable education, these institutions are struggling with funding inconsistencies, faculty shortages, and curriculum misalignment with job market demands . Addressing these challenges requires targeted reforms to strengthen financial mechanisms, enhance curriculum relevance, and improve educational quality . Stakeholder collaboration, particularly increased

government investment, is essential for ensuring the long-term sustainability of community colleges and their contribution to equitable higher education

Community colleges are instrumental in Nepal's transition from a least-developed to a developing nation by enhancing quality, accessibility, affordability, and transparency in higher education . Currently, they operate in 73 districts, focusing on marginalized communities and offering programs tailored to societal needs . Community colleges alone are 72 of total 103 accredited HEIs which stands as evidence of their commitment to academic excellence . To advance this mission, community colleges are integrating digital technology, offering scholarships, and providing grants to deserving educators . However, the alignment of SDGs with daily academic operations, investments, and partnerships is necessary to maximize their impact . A structured incentive system: public recognition, tax exemptions, and sustainable regular grants can motivate these colleges to comply their efforts with national development goals . Strong monitoring mechanisms by the UGC and concerned universities are needed to ensure SDGs compliance . Community colleges directly contribute to SDGs targets through employment, economic growth, gender equity, and sustainable practices . By fostering innovation and partnerships, these colleges can drive sustainable education reform, ensuring that higher education remains to be inclusive, standardized, and ecologically responsible . Integrating SDGs into community colleges is not just a desired policy shift, it is also an investment in the resilience and sustainability of Nepal's education system.

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