# Youth Perspectives on Institutionalisation and Reintegration

**Abstract**
*This qualitative study examined the characteristics, needs and desires of institutionalised youth before and after discharge. This is for the purpose of understanding the holistic impact of rehabilitative institutions on youth, from the perspective of youth. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 7 former clients of the Singapore Boys' Hostel in June 2016. The findings suggest that such youth emerge from the institution with a strong desire for disengaging from past criminal habits and a greater awareness of coping mechanisms for stress. It is also found that social support acts as a strong motivating factor for change at all stages of the rehabilitation process. Youth are potentially vulnerable to experiencing relapse, if there is no social support to substitute the nurturing, protective environment provided in the institutional setting. The identification of the needs and strengths of these youth has important implications for community-based programmes which seek to reintegrate youth back into society and their families.*

**Key words:** probation; institutionalisation; rehabilitation; reintegration; youth offenders.

**Introduction**
From a psychosocial perspective, the main problem which youth face is reconciling "the person one has come to be" and "the person society expects one to become" (Kaduson, 2016). The culmination of internal conflicts and external pressures experienced at this developmental stage often triggers antisocial behaviours in youth to varying degrees.

Within this context, probation acts as a rehabilitative, community-based measure meant to promote positive change in offenders (MSF, 2016). Targeted intervention is employed according to the nature of crimes committed. In other words, the desired outcome of rehabilitation varies from individual to individual; it could be "improved emotional health, stronger personal discipline, social responsibility or acquir[ed] life skills" (MSF, 2014). Given that youth possess different developmental needs and social roles from adults, intervention should be addressing the specific developmental and social factors of their age group (Sullivan, 2004).

*Local institutional programmes*
There are five core principles of institutional rehabilitation, as established by the Singapore government (MSF, 2014):

(1) "Providing Care with the Aim of Reintegration Back into the Family and Society";
(2) "Developing and Fostering a Safe and Supportive Environment for Rehabilitation";
(3) "Maximizing the Strengths and Potential of Each Person";
(4) "Strengthening the Family";
(5) "Fostering Synergistic Partnerships with the Community".

These principles govern the work done by Approved Institutions such as the Singapore Boys' Hostel (SBHL). For this study, all participants were recruited from the SBHL, which is one of REACH Youth's institutional partners.

Unlike the Singapore Boys' Home, SBHL works with lower-risk youth offenders placed on probation in the community. The aim of hostel residency is to provide structure and supervision through the staff and restricted environment. For example, youth are expected to "maintain discipline and exercise social responsibility" in carrying out daily duties (MSF, 2011):

"A critical lesson in the youth rehabilitation journey is that of building self-discipline and self-control to reign in their temperament and behaviour" (MSF, 2014).

Additionally, the hostel operator, Trybe Ltd, employs a therapeutic approach to working with residents. The values it upholds include (Trybe, 2016):

(1) Restorative Coaching: Training youth to build genuine relationships and solve problems by providing mentors in the form of Life Coaches and Personal Coaches;
(2) Constructive Engagement: Building a positive culture of purposeful living among youth;
(3) Community Reintegration: Ensuring that youth are socially supported post-discharge by working with their communities.

REACH Community Services Society (RCSS) complements the work done by Trybe Ltd in improving the reintegration process. In August 2015, the youth branch of the organisation, REACH Youth (RY), launched its pilot programme, HEROES, for residents of the SBHL. The 9-month programme aimed to facilitate reintegration through casework and counselling on individual, family and group levels. This approach is founded upon the unique knowledge about effective youth engagement that RY has gathered over the years. For example, adult mentoring through the use of sports is employed. Due to the gap in local extant research on reintegrating institutionalised youth, a trial-and-error approach was used in evaluating the success of the HEROES programme. The organisation therefore believes that there is much room for improvement, and is interested in understanding the common profile of institutionalised youth.

*Institutions as developmentally disruptive*
Foreign research suggests that in environments where institutions and their representatives of authority are oppressive, opportunities for development are severely limited. This occurs when the medical model is employed, wherein institutionalised youth are perceived as problematic, "severely impaired and in need of intensive treatment and monitoring" (Polvere, 2014). In such stigmatising environments, institutionalised youth are typically unable to exercise self-determination; their opinions are rarely recognised by adults unless they are compliant to institutional rules and regulations (LeFrancois, 2008) (as cited in Polvere, 2014). Given the absence of youth perspective about institutions from research, it remains difficult to ascertain whether the same atmosphere of stigma is present locally.

**Methodology**
*Study aims*
This study sought to understand the experience of institutionalisation from the perspective of youth residents. Particularly, this study aimed to explore the differences between institutionalised and non-institutionalised youth; for instance, whether biopsychosocial developments were delayed as a result of the restricted environment in the institution.

       **Research Question 1:**

What are the benefits and challenges that youth encounter as a resident of an institution?

**Research Question 2:**
What are the unique needs and interests of institutionalised youth post-discharge?

*Participants*
Participants in the study were 7 youth from SBHL, ranging in age from 16 to 19 years old. All participants were discharged from the hostel within the period of January to April 2016. The method of recruitment was by liaison with the participants' programme or case workers in REACH Youth. Three participants identified as Malay, another three as Chinese, and one as Indian.

*Ethics*
Informed consent was sought from all participants and the limits to confidentiality were explained. Participants were informed that audio records would be collected during the interview and destroyed three months after the publishing of the research study.

*Data collection and analysis*
The researcher elicited information from the participants through semi-structured interviews. All the interviews were conducted in July 2016, and were either face-to-face or phone interviews. Due to the limited amount of time, each participant was interviewed once, with the duration of the interview ranging from 30 minutes to more than an hour. An interview guide was used to stimulate discussion involving the topics of physical, mental, social and spiritual aspects of the participant, within the time frames of pre- and post-discharge. Information was collected in the form of handwritten notes and audio recordings, which were thereafter transcribed. Participants were also asked to use language to describe several aspects of their institutional experience. For instance, a sample question would be:

"What words would you use to describe the relationship between you and your Life/Personal Coach (e.g mentor, brother, friend)?"

An open coding procedure was adopted in analysing the raw transcript data. Through an initial reading of the compiled transcripts, codes were developed and refined. Descriptive coding formed the bulk of analytical points, wherein codes are based on topic or content (Lichtman, 2013). The process of converting the raw data into useful information is as follows:

Structural coding (labelling raw data) → Pattern coding (grouping labels into themes) → Triangulation (determining relevance of themes to data) (Lichtman, 2013)

One limitation observed is that young offenders may not be forthright in expressing their views, perhaps due to their negative experience with criminal justice interviews (Holt *et al.*, 2011), or difficulties with oral language (Fougere *et al.*, 2013) (as cited in Tracey *et al.*, 2015). There were attempts to minimise this issue by making efforts to present the interview as an informal sharing session, in order to make participants feel comfortable in releasing information. Additionally, participants were encouraged to use different languages (code-switching) to allow room for expression. Translations into English were clarified with the participants, following their speech.

**Findings**
Pseudonyms are used below to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

> **Research Question 1:**
> What are the benefits and challenges that youth encounter as a resident of an institution?

Given that all the participants were already in the post-discharge phase of rehabilitation, data about hostel life were elicited through prompting the participants to recall their daily routines in the institution, as well as their emotional state as they journeyed through hostel life.

Two central themes regarding the institutional experience were derived from the interviews.

All participants recounted the multiple difficulties they faced upon entering the institution. For instance, many expressed feeling stressed (to varying degrees) by the highly regulated nature of the institution. On the whole, the participants held conflicting views about the usefulness of the rules and regulations in helping them to rehabilitate (Theme 1). However, all participants reflected gratitude for the strong and supportive social network they received in the institution. Many participants identified a sense of camaraderie as an important factor in experiencing positive shifts in mindsets towards a variety of matters. A few participants were able to describe concrete changes, such as increased determination for self-improvement (Theme 2).

*Theme 1: coping with lifestyle changes*
When discussing their experience in the institution, all participants voiced their initial unhappiness with the long admittance period and lack of freedom in the hostel. Some participants described their frustration using words such as "very sad", "hate" and "f***ed up". Others recounted instances of being physically affected by the restrictions. For example, Eric reported the following:

*I felt stressed all the time, 'cos no freedom to do what I want. I cannot speak vulgarities and my home leave is controlled. (Eric)*

The effect of having restricted movement was more extensive for some. For example, Francis and Greg reflected that they were unable to spend more time on the activities that they valued, given that all residents were required to follow a schedule planned for them:

*I stay[ed] in hostel and it suck[ed]. If you say we have a lot of activities, yes, but we're not interested in it. Most people have different interests, and we can't even choose anything [that we like to do]. (Francis)*

*There's no way you can study in hostel… you have to call the teacher to ask, "What does this thing mean? What does that thing mean?" In the hostel you can't anyhow use the phone, it's being restricted and you can only study at night. But then I rather not, 'cos we have to wake up at six and be downstairs by seven. So I rather sleep lah, than sabotaging the whole dorm. My exams were quite bad… maybe now I'll drop out 'cos of army. (Greg)*

From Francis's perspective, possessing true choice meant not only having a diversity of activities to choose from, but also being given the chance to determine how he spent his time.

For Greg, his desire to study in preparation for returning back to school was stymied by the limited help he could receive.

Most participants described how they were able to employ intrinsic and extrinsic coping mechanisms to overcome the initial despondency they felt about entering the hostel. A participant emphasised the fact that his desire to turn over a new leaf was self-driven:

*I decide to change for the better. Actually it's more to myself. Hostel teach me to be disciplined, but it's up to me to decide to change. Because if you stay in hostel without changing, it's wasted lah, might as well change. (Brandon)*

However, most participants attributed their determination to change, to the encouragement and advice from authoritative figures such as family members, hostel staff and school teachers. Many expressed remorse and gratitude upon seeing how these figures continued to support them despite their relapses. For instance, Andy discussed how he gained insight on the meaning of true friendship:

*I do a lot of things for my [old] friends… they are happily outside, but I'm suffering inside. I'm not the only one suffering , my family also suffer[s], and teachers also suffer. I hurt a lot of people. If I get hurt a lot of times I will give up and move on. But they never move on. (Andy)*

Andy's ability to make comparisons between his past and present support networks indicates a reevaluation of personal beliefs about friendship and trust. Similarly, Dan and Greg also recounted how they were touched by the concern they received from the hostel staff:

*At the first part I didn't believe that they will help me, but on of my officers… I very sad also lah, make him like that… He cried for me. I'm just a resident of the home. He really help me. People help me, then I don't want to help myself. Not good [to] make use of people, take advantage. (Dan)*

*They really gain our respect. They gain it, they really gain it… You can believe [or] not, a staff cried for we all, some more it's a guy… When I see all this, wah, they [are] really not acting, they really care for us and want us to change. (Greg)*

Like Dan, many of the participants repeatedly described the hostel staff as having helped them "a lot". This implies that they were very surprised and touched by the outpouring of emotions that the staff showed towards them, given that the participants themselves were 'just' residents who had committed wrongdoings, while the staff had no obligation to go beyond carrying out administrative duties. It can be said that the staff left a very deep impact on the youth's perspective of the institution.

However, two participants stated that the effect of the institutional practices on their lives (post-discharge) felt minimal to them. Chris described the institutional experience as "very normal" with only significant changes in his anger management skills, while Francis concluded that the time given to reflect inside the hostel caused little observable change:

*Hostel doesn't change much. It's a punishment. It's the crime that caused us to go in, it's just time to reflect on ourselves. But reflecting didn't help, it's still the same (laughs). (Francis)*

From Francis's perspective, the institution appears to be a vehicle for encouraging personal introspection and reflection, rather than an active shaper of residents' mindsets. He viewed his time in hostel as a punishment and saw little change in his habits post-discharge.

*Theme 2: motivated by peers*
The participants frequently elaborated on their relationships with other hostel residents, which were overwhelmingly described as positive and beneficial in various ways. All expressed that the long period of time spent together with other residents inevitably drew them closer. Most residents argued that the friendships forged inside the hostel were stronger than those made outside because of the common characteristics the hostel residents shared:

*Outside the friends… don't know what is difficult life, like the food we eat, the way we fall in… The hostel guys tend to see the sadder side. Outside one is all happy… but hostel is different. We have to cover each other… It makes us more mature in a sense. (Greg)*

According to Greg and other participants, outsiders (presumably old friends) were unable to comprehend that hostel life was tough and regimented. The difficulties the residents faced were only fully understood by themselves. This created a sense of solidarity among the residents, which acted as both emotional and practical support in times of trouble.

Some participants also expressed that the long periods of time spent with other residents provided an opportunity for knowledge to be exchanged. As Brandon explained, much of this insider knowledge revolved around the punishments for different offences:

*I learn[t]… to avoid other crime[s]… for example, if got this hostel boy, I ask him, "What's your case?" Then he say, "Staring, fighting…" Then I take that lesson and apply it to myself. So next time don't go say people like that, then will get fight, then fight will get fresh case… (Brandon)*

Brandon was able to internalise and distill learning points from the offences committed by other residents. Similarly, Greg shared what he had learnt from his peers and the staff:

*Now when people… stare at me, it doesn't affect me anymore… Now I know the consequence [of retaliating violently], so I just let these people be… I'm pretty sure I know how to face problems legally. I know how to do things right, I know how to back off in a fight. I know what I'm doing now. (Greg)*

Previously, Greg had been arrested for gang-related offences often caused by staring incidents. During the interview, he was able to discuss alternative strategies to solve the problems that had gotten him into trouble in the first place. The watershed event was his awareness of legal consequences for various wrongdoings.

Finally, one participant offered an example of how the residents looked out for each other despite facing personal problems:

*Even though [friends in hostel] do a lot of wrong things, they never ask[ed] me to do… Inside got a lot of people take drugs, but they never ask other people to take drugs. They already suffering… they don't want us to suffer. (Andy)*

Andy was also able to pick up constructive habits from his peers, like improving his fitness level:

*Last time I will do 200 pushups a day, really extreme… I got this quote I like: "No pain, no gain." This habit is something I pick[ed] up in hostel. I saw others do it (intense exercise). They say no pain no gain. (Andy)*

> **Research Question 2:**
> What are the unique needs and interests of institutionalised youth post-discharge?

Three central themes regarding the status of institutionalised youth after discharge were derived. First, all participants voiced experiencing various fears and worries about their new life; at the same time, many participants asserted their self-dependency in resolving problems (Theme 3). Almost all participants were able to elaborate on their aspirations for the future, although some admitted that little was being done to achieve these goals (Theme 4). Lastly, the participants expressed varying degrees of success in connecting with their peers and family (Theme 5).

*Theme 3: managing newfound worries*
While a small minority of participants seemed unwilling to discuss all of their problems with the researcher, all participants were able to raise at least one pressing issue they were facing during the post-discharge period. Some participants made comparisons between hostel life and their present life, even voicing their preference to return to the simplicity of hostel life. Coming out of the heavily regulated and protected environment, the participants found themselves surrounded by old temptations and negative influences:

*Inside [hostel] at least got rules to follow, outside nobody to look out for us… I'm scared [old friends] will just anyhow shoot my name, and I kena charged. (Dan)*

*Your old friends will come find you… and initially you will be afraid to tell them… "We're just going to cut ties." … Another thing is girls… I breached my probation because of a few girls. In hostel, there's no way I'll be able to do this kind of thing. (Greg)*

Aside from coping with fears of returning to bad habits of the past, the participants also described their struggles in turning over a new leaf. For instance, Eric explicated the pressures of being "good":

*[My parents] expect me to go to school, go to work, discipline myself a lot more. It's hard to be a good person! If you're bad, people don't have anything to say. But if you're good and you make a mistake, got a lot of expectations from people. (Eric)*

Interestingly, many participants were not willing to employ social support as a problem-solving tool to overcome their problems. When prompted to brainstorm possible sources of help, the majority of the participants firmly declined to include the hostel staff. Many participants instead expressed gratitude towards the staff for providing great assistance during their hostel stay, leading to an unwillingness to burden the staff further post-discharge. Several participants mentioned the added difficulty of finding emotional and practical support when overcoming problems. For instance, Dan recounted how he failed to obtain support from his mother:

*Nobody wants to help… [My mum] has changed a lot. Last time I called home, and she asked, "What you want some more!" I got angry and shouted back. She stressed about something, bill or what, I really don't know. When I'm inside, they all say they miss me. But when I'm out, they 'attitude' me, so why can't I 'attitude' them back? … She got her own problem, just that I don't know… I feel no point to share. (Dan)*

Feelings of confusion and helplessness can be identified from Dan's words. Although he was proactive in looking for advice, he experienced rejection from his parent, who was trying to cope with stress on her own. This caused Dan to respond defensively and conclude that trying to share with others was useless. Personal problems aside, other participants shared likewise how they witnessed their parents and guardians juggling multiple issues related to daily living, which further discouraged them from sharing their problems.

*Theme 4: reaching personal aspirations*
All but one participant were able to share with the researcher an aspiration they had for their future. Several participants went beyond sharing about academic pursuits to talk about their dream occupations, such as becoming a social worker, lawyer or army officer. Although these participants had very different aspirations, they were similarly hopeful about the future. However, the one participant who expressed dissatisfaction with the status quo, Francis, illustrated the dangers of living in freedom but without purpose:

*Now it sucks, sucks, sucks. I repeat the same thing over and over again every day. [About my life], I'm just letting it pass by day by day and let everything take its own course. I'm quite comfortable now. I feel good [because there's no trouble now], but sucky at the same time. (Francis)*

*Theme 5: building social networks*
The participants all indicated that they had cut off ties with their old friends, whom they had engaged in criminal activities with. Some participants emphasised a changed mindset towards friendship:

*Now I cut a lot of friends. Some are not good for me. So I don't want to get in trouble. (Andy)*

*Now I meet my [new] friends once every three weeks… First first [friends] can be good lah, but long long they can teach bad things. Like last time lah, they tell you, "Eh, come try this." (Brandon)*

This new-found awareness about the danger of harmful friendships also made the participants more appreciative of positive influences in their lives:

*I will rank 8 or 9 upon 10 for [my level of] self-confidence [as I was leaving] hostel. Because my life coach, probation officer, counsellor [gave] me a lot of support, I [felt] supported and gained back my confidence on being good outside. (Andy)*

Here, Andy's statements show that he had lost confidence in his ability to live a crime-free life after having gone through painful events, such as being betrayed by his closest friend. However, he was able to bounce back by relying on emotional support from the hostel staff.

Other participants expressed their gratitude towards RY staff who had followed them through the pre- and post-discharge phases. For example, Greg observed how his interactions with the staff were markedly different from that with his friends:

*The environment, the sports people, are different… They are good people… The way they talk to you, you already know… Don't use vulgar[ities] and stuff, very socialised and can earn people's respect. There are no problems with them. (Greg)*

Similarly, Brandon voiced his admiration for the RY staff who engaged him in sports activities:

*[They are like] senpai (teachers). I really respect them with all my heart. I treat them more than friends, I respect them. (Brandon)*

**Discussion**
The findings of this study offer insight into the most crucial and unique aspects of institutionalisation for youth, over a critical period of transition. This study incorporates a strengths-based perspective into the typical medical, deficit-based research approach to rehabilitation. This was done by analysing the coping strategies and aspirations of the youth participants, instead of merely capturing the effects of institutionalisation on their lives. The qualitative research method used to collect information from participants offers a fresh perspective on the interactions between the service provider (the institution) and users (the youth).

The themes that emerged from the interviews indicate that institutionalisation is a period of great change for many youth. As expected, youth typically experience great difficulty in adjusting to the regulated lifestyle within the institution. The restricted environment thereby facilitates the strengthening of self-discipline and self-control, which is a key purpose that the institution is expected to fulfil (MSF, 2014). However, it also calls into attention the limitations of institutionalisation, such as the perpetuation of educational underachievement for delinquents (Gottfredson, 2001) (as cited in Sullivan, 2004). This was reflected by some participants. Given that higher education is viewed as a "socially desirable and highly prevalent developmental path in the transition to adulthood" across various demographics (Sullivan, 2004), youth who may not receive adequate academic support potentially face greater social stigmatisation further on in life.

However, the ability of the hostel staff to create strong emotional bonds with the residents is highly commendable. All participants voiced their appreciation for the staff's assistance in personal matters that were of great value to them, while some participants further expressed their incredulity at the staff's willingness to inconvenience themselves for their sake. Such accounts of supportive and dynamic interactions between staff and residents indicate that it is possible for institutions to go beyond the medical model of treatment, which is founded upon the imbalanced relationship between the authoritative institution and passive patient (Polvere, 2014). Contrary to the clinical discourse of research on rehabilitation, the study thereby suggests that institutions can provide emotional support to their residents.

In addition, the study reinforces the importance of peer support for the rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents. The sense of camaraderie among hostel residents as described by the participants suggests that peers can become a powerful agent for change. Even as change was

enforced by the institution, the residents themselves were being influenced by each other. Once again, this finding is markedly distinct from research rooted in the medical model and instead emulates the person-in-environment perspective found in the field of social work (Hepworth, 2013).

The participants also revealed their struggles in reintegrating into their communities. Concerns such as recidivism, managing newfound expectations from others and achieving personal aspirations were examples of how many youth "walk the tightrope between their good intentions [to leave behind their past criminal behaviours] and the reality of their opportunities" (Inderbitzin, 2009). This study also identifies the potential danger of failing to substitute the emotional and practical support from the institution post-discharge. When presented with a hypothetical scenario of a problem, almost all participants declared that they would not burden family or hostel staff with the issue, but would settle matters themselves. This preferred solution was sometimes related to their awareness of growing up and assuming self-responsibility. Indeed, youth discharged from institutions juggle two transitions - from confinement into community, and from adolescence into adulthood (Sullivan, 2004). Given that reintegration involves development-related issues, it is potentially more difficult for youth to reintegrate successfully, as compared to adults.

The participants further shared their aspirations for the future and their evaluation of relationships with others, which indicated a strong sense of self-awareness. According to self-determination theory, intrinsic motivation is driven by three fundamental psychological needs: relatedness with others, autonomy and a sense of competency (Ryan *et al.*, 2000) (as cited in Tracey *et al.*, 2015). Relatedness comes from a connection with others and feeling of being cared for, while autonomy is derived from the ability to make personal choices and be self-directed. Competency appears in the form of feeling effective in playing one's roles in the environment. The participants exhibited varying degrees to which these needs had been satisfied. For the participant who expressed strong dissatisfaction with his current life (post-discharge), his feelings could be a result of his low self-esteem and lack of self-direction, which were observed during the interview. Therefore, the study supports the position that successful reintegration involves not only reducing recidivism, but also improving the individual's own ability to lead a more fulfilling life (Tracey *et al.*, 2015). This study also reflects the considerable influence which older, more mature figures have over the lives of the youth. For some youth, the support that they receive from these mentors is greater than what they believe their peers can give them.

**Conclusion**
This study highlights the importance of understanding the reintegration process from the ex-offender's perspective. The local government is ramping up works with rehabilitative institutions and voluntary welfare organisations to improve the reintegration process. At this crucial point of development, greater focus must be placed on securing what the service users perceive to be most useful, as they fight old temptations and struggle to overcome new challenges after being discharged. This client-centred approach follows recent efforts to move away from the medical model of research, and to instead recognise the dynamic interactions occurring between youth and their institutional environments (Vygotsky, 1978) (as cited in Polvere, 2014).

The study thus not only captures the challenges of institutional life, but also its strengths. For instance, the therapeutic approach taken by the institution in this study is shown to be useful in strengthening its residents' motivation to change and ability to recover from relapses. Moreover, not only the institution but the residents themselves are agents for positive change. Another observation derived is that youth thrive on support from both their peers and figures of authority in their lives. Given that social support is of such great value to the youth, it is therefore vital to quickly secure positive sources of support for the youth during the post-discharge period. Otherwise, youth may be susceptible to falling into bad company yet again - which, for many, was the main reason that they had landed into trouble with the law in the first place.

Given the fact that this study employs a small sample that is a narrow subset of the population of juvenile delinquents, there are few generalisations that can be made from this study. Moreover, given that the depth of content in the interviews was dependent on how comfortable the participants felt with the interviewer, the data collected may not be a completely true representation of the participants' opinions. Moreover, given the paucity of rehabilitation research utilising the perspective of ex-offenders, the findings of this study should be taken as a more explorative rather than definitive understanding of the needs and experiences of institutionalised youth.

Nevertheless, it is important for policymakers and stakeholders to employ the findings of this study as an opportunity to delve deeper into the lives of institutionalised youth. Further research needs to examine the perspectives of the institution and family members of the youth; the effectiveness of methods used by institutions to follow up on youth who have been discharged (e.g probation); the usefulness of sports and other activities used to keep youth engaged constructively.

**Author's Note**
The views expressed do not necessarily represent any official views of REACH Community Services Society.

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