

## **Youth Partnership**

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Partnership between the European Commission  
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth



## **The value and cost of learning mobility** - Concept paper –

Miguel Angel Garcia Lopez

Co-ordinated by: Lana Pasic

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## Introduction and background

Following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in spring 2020, learning mobility and youth work activities moved to digital and online learning environments for two years. This was coupled with greater concerns regarding the impact of travel on climate change, resulting in discussions around the need for face-to-face activities and their costs. As a result of these developments, the European Platform on Learning Mobility (EPLM), in its spring 2022 meeting, discussed the restart of youth learning mobility, with a focus on quality, sustainability and online learning. In light of that discussion, this paper examines the educational and intercultural value of learning mobility, putting in context the costs of travel, both financial and environmental, as compared to other sectors.

### The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on learning mobility activities

Existing research and studies show that the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact not just on youth work and non-formal education but very particularly on learning mobility in Europe.

In 2020, the European Commission carried out [a survey on the impact of Covid-19 on the learning mobility activities of Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps](#) (European Commission 2020), including formal and non-formal education activities. More than 57 000 respondents received the survey, which represents all forms of mobility supported by the programmes and accounts for 40% of the estimated population in mobility activities at the time of the coronavirus outbreak. The survey was completed by around 11 800 participants in mobility activities funded by the Erasmus+ programme and the European Solidarity Corps. The ratio of learners (students, trainees, young people) to staff (teachers, trainers, youth workers, etc.) was 74% to 26%. The distribution between the two groups in the programme is represented by this ratio.

The main finding of the survey was that the percentage of the participants who were not (or were only slightly) impacted by the Covid-19 crisis was around 25%. The remaining 75% of survey respondents declared that their activities were impacted by the pandemic in different ways and to different degrees.

The results of the survey indicate that an activity was definitively cancelled for 36% of respondents (with differences between sectors: 17% of participants in the Erasmus+ youth and European Solidarity Corps and 25% of Erasmus+ students had their mobility activities cancelled). Meanwhile, 42% of respondents continued their activities through various arrangements (such as distance or online learning), with variations across sectors. For 22% of respondents, the activity was temporarily discontinued.

Based on the sample of the survey, and applying its findings to all beneficiaries, it can be concluded that the Covid-19 crisis had an impact on more than 107 000 Erasmus+ mobility participants. Nearly 45 000 participants (42%) carried out their activities under various circumstances (such as distance learning or online learning), more than 23 500 participants had their activities temporarily interrupted (22%) and more than 38 500 participants (36%) had their activities definitively cancelled. While 27 000 remained overseas, more than 80 000 participants returned home (European Commission 2020).

At the level of the Council of Europe, the Joint Council of Youth (CMJ) working group on Covid-19 launched a survey in spring 2020 to assess the immediate impact of the pandemic on youth organisations. A total of 48 youth organisations across Council of Europe member states completed the survey, including 18 local youth NGOs, 14 international networks or organisations, and 10 national and 6 regional networks or organisations.

The [“Effects of Covid-19 across youth work and youth activities”](#) study, based on the survey, shows that the majority of youth organisations had to cancel all of their scheduled activities for 2020/21. This was especially true for learning mobility projects, the majority of which were cancelled due to external factors (travel restrictions, curfews and lockdowns) and internal factors (many organisations reported having trouble mobilising and inspiring their board members, staff and even volunteers to engage in, contribute to and create mobility projects). The same study suggests that similar restrictions and declines in participation apply also to volunteer projects (European Union-Council of Europe Youth Partnership 2020).

A [multilingual survey, part of the research project on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on youth work in Europe](#), run by the RAY Network, surveyed 1 097 youth workers and youth leaders in winter 2020/21. Survey results show that the pandemic had a profound effect on youth workers and volunteers: “working time of staff and number of paid staff at international level decreased for around a third; while more than half of organisations reported a drop in the number of volunteers and for two thirds the volunteering time decreased at international level. Additionally, for 60% of the responding organisations the budget decreased in the context of international youth work” (RAY Network 2021).

As a result of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic and the switch to online learning activities, youth organisations, like in formal education settings, also started making use of online opportunities in order to continue with their activities. The digital tools and instruments utilised included Digital badges, Miro, Google Hangout, Zoom, Facebook, Discord, Slack, Padlet and Jitsi (European Union-Council of Europe Youth Partnership 2020).

## Climate change, environmental awareness and young people

Many studies demonstrate the growing awareness among young people about climate change and its consequences. In the framework of the pan-European “End climate change, start climate of change” campaign, funded by the European Commission, a [survey](#) was conducted between 29 October and 19 November 2020 among young people aged 15-35 in 23 European countries. Overall, 22 377 young people were surveyed – in 21 of the countries included in the study over 1 000 young people were surveyed, and over 500 were surveyed in Cyprus and Malta (Ipsos Belgium, European Public Affairs 2021).

Even in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, nearly half of young Europeans (46%) ranked climate change as a top priority and world’s most critical issue, followed by environmental degradation, such as air pollution, deforestation and wildlife extinction (44%). Overall, 84% of young Europeans express either some level of very great or extreme concern about climate change. Nearly half (46%) are extremely or very concerned. Only a small minority (16%) are unconcerned or only mildly concerned about climate change. When asked to rate a number of actions based on the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\) of the United Nations](#) in order of importance, they mostly mention “take urgent action

to prevent climate change and its repercussions,” followed by “support sustainable economic growth”. Young Europeans who prioritise climate change tend to be female, under 24 years old and unemployed (this category includes mainly students) (Ipsos Belgium, European Public Affairs 2021).

The [special Eurobarometer on Climate Change](#) (European Union 2021) confirms the same tendencies. In comparison with other age groups, analysis of the socio-demographic data shows that respondents aged 15-24 were more likely than those aged 55 and over to say that climate change is the single most serious problem facing the world (22% compared with 16%).

## Value and cost of learning mobility

In the context of the severe impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on learning mobility activities, their frequent relocation online, and the high awareness of young people about climate change and its consequences, a debate has emerged on the need for or desirability of mobility activities – whether, considering the environmental costs linked to travelling, mobility activities should be replaced by online activities. In order to explore the key aspects and implications of this debate, this section analyses the value of learning mobility activities and the benefits and limitations of online activities.

### Value of learning mobility

There are many evaluations, reports and impact studies describing and demonstrating the value of learning mobility at different levels. In 2022, the Erasmus+ programme celebrated the 35th anniversary of its existence. To mark this occasion, multiple factsheets, annual reports, personal testimonies and evaluations across different generations of learning mobility programmes in the field of youth were put together, offering a comprehensive long-term perspective of their value and impact.

In the [combined evaluation of Erasmus+ and predecessor programmes](#) (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture 2017), the main conclusion is that these mobility programmes added value to participating organisations, and contributed indirectly to policies and systems, in addition to adding value to direct beneficiaries (learners and practitioners). This combined evaluation covered both predecessor actions from 2007 to 2013 and the Erasmus+ programme from 2014 to 2016, both in the formal and non-formal sectors.

One quarter of Europeans believe that learning mobility initiatives like Erasmus are among the most positive outcomes of the EU. This demonstrates that the programme’s contribution goes beyond the immediate effects on direct beneficiaries. The programme is viewed as one of the foundations of European identity by Europeans and it represents several of the tangible advantages that the EU offers to its citizens.

Nearly all participants expressed full appreciation of the programme (98% satisfaction). The figure is somewhat lower for learners (93%), but it nevertheless remains very high. A key element of the value of learning mobility is recognition for learners upon their return. All higher education students receive formal recognition of their participation in learning mobility, but even more importantly, 80% receive full academic recognition for learning outcomes and another 15% receive partial academic recognition. Recognition is also being strengthened in the sectors of vocational education and training (VET) (88%

recognition of learning outcomes) and youth (80% recognition) (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture 2017).

The results of a quasi-experimental analysis<sup>1</sup> of survey data suggest that programme participation, both in formal and non-formal education activities, has the following effects on learners: a 19% increase in the sense of belonging to the EU, a 31% rise in the inclination to relocate permanently abroad, an 8.2% increase in the view that education is valuable (as compared to non-participants) and a speedier passage from education to employment. A shorter transition to employment (less than three months) is 13% more likely for participants in Erasmus+.

Other complementary findings were identified by respondents. The majority of learners and participants believe that the programme developed their key competencies (i.e. multilingual competence; personal, social and learning to learn competence; citizenship competence; entrepreneurship competence; cultural awareness and expression competence; digital competence; mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering; literacy competence).

In addition to the strong evidence of the programme's contribution to the development of participants' skills and competencies, the case studies emphasised the positive influence the programme plays in the personal development, maturity and autonomy of young people. Confidence, independence and open-mindedness were frequently emphasised. Other positive effects were also identified, including networking and co-operation with international peers, the use of digital resources, and involvement in volunteering and community activities. Overall, the practitioners themselves strongly appreciate the fact that the programme gave them an opportunity to grow personally and professionally.

The [Erasmus+ Higher Education Impact Study](#) (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture 2019) supports these findings, based on approximately 77 000 survey responses from staff, students and higher education institutions who participated in the programme between 2014 and 2018.

In this impact study, students using Erasmus+ mobility for study or training purposes improved their employability, with the majority (72%) saying it was beneficial or very beneficial when looking for their first job. Of the participants, 40% of those who completed an internship were offered a job at the company/organisation where they worked, around 10% started their own business and many more (75%) plan to do so in the future. Erasmus+ participants in the labour market say they are more satisfied with their jobs than non-Erasmus+ students. They are also more likely to work abroad in the future (23% of Erasmus+ participants compared to 15% of non-Erasmus+ participants), giving them an international outlook (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture 2019).

Learning mobility has increased the professional, interpersonal, and intercultural skills and abilities of participants, including their self-confidence, ability to achieve goals, and social and cultural openness.

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1. Quasi-experimental analysis is a type of research analysis that attempts to establish a cause-and-effect relationship. The main difference with a true experimental method is that the groups are not randomly assigned (Thomas 2020).

Erasmus+ students are also adopting new ways of learning, and more Erasmus+ students than non-Erasmus+ students plan to continue their studies at a higher level.

Moreover, more than 32% of Erasmus+ students identify as only or predominantly European after the end of the mobility period, compared to 25% prior to the mobility period (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2019).

The social and community impact of learning mobility activities has not been as broadly researched as the direct impact on participants. Nonetheless, the EPLM has conducted extensive research in this area. The conference [Power of Learning Mobility](#) in Ostend in 2019 explored the broader impact of learning mobility projects. The report of the conference, including the preparatory desk mapping, describes the wide range of social and community impacts identified by participants. These include solidarity activities, intergenerational co-operation, civic engagement initiatives, inclusion, and gender equality projects in their communities. The EPLM and the Youth Partnership also conducted [follow-up research](#) on the social and community impact of learning mobility, which resulted in the publication of a [practical guide](#) by SALTO ESC Resource Centre (SALTO ESC 2020).

## Environmental cost of learning mobility and strategies for mitigating it

Learning mobility activities imply travelling, which has negative consequences in terms of climate change. So, learning mobility is, to a certain extent, environmentally unfriendly.

Should young people therefore give up or limit their learning mobility activities? To answer this question, which is at the heart of this concept paper, it is appropriate to add an element of analysis, such as the extent to which youth learning mobility activities are environmentally unfriendly, particularly in relation to other sectors and age groups.

In comparison with other age groups, young people feel more “personally responsible” and more aware of climate change. As the analysis of the socio-demographic data of the [special Eurobarometer on Climate Change](#) (European Commission 2021) shows, when asked about who is responsible for tackling climate change, younger cohorts (15-24), compared to those over 55, consider the EU (61% compared with 54%), and themselves personally (44% compared with 37%) responsible for taking actions to mitigate the effects of climate change. The survey – conducted by [IPSOS](#) on behalf of the European Environmental Bureau and its partners in the [Climate of Change](#) project, shows that young people are also more willing to change their lifestyle habits and take action. Young people are more active in sorting waste for recycling (79%) and trying to save energy at home (78%), and 80% rarely throw away food waste (Ipsos Belgium European Public Affairs 2021).

It should be noted that European mobility programmes in the field of youth have for a long time been incorporating environmentally friendly strategies and practices. Environmental, sustainable and global education have been priority fields of work for learning mobility and youth work, and have contributed to the growing European and global awareness of these topics.

At the moment, the environment and the fight against climate change are among the priorities of the Erasmus+ programme, and green transport and mobility, the environment and climate change, and

green skills are among the most frequently prioritised topics and focus areas of learning mobility activities. In the [2023 Erasmus+ annual work programme](#), priority is given to projects on sustainability in school education, including developing sustainability competences and skills, promoting positive action on sustainability and tackling eco-anxiety, and supporting teacher capacity building and whole school approaches to sustainability (European Commission 2023). Sustainable development and climate action are priorities for the [European Solidarity Corps](#).

Together with the many projects promoting environmental awareness, change of daily habits and environmental policies, specific projects have been launched to explore how to reduce the environmental impact of learning mobility. Two examples of these, among many, are [Green Erasmus](#) and [Erasmus goes green](#). In these projects, after a detailed analysis of the carbon footprint of mobility activities, differentiated by actions, there are a series of valuable intellectual outcomes and recommendations at different levels. These address the daily life of participants and their habits (e.g. travelling, food, energy, waste and recycling), and offer recommendations to organisations and policy makers at national and European levels.

Green Travel is supported under the Erasmus programme and additional funding is available for sustainable travel on foot or by bicycle. The ongoing sharing among different organisations has contributed to the sharing of best practices and to the setting of higher environmental standards in relation to the use and recycling of materials, accommodation and local transportation in mobility activities.

At the Council of Europe level, a summit was held in May 2023, bringing together heads of state and government. The summit, through a [Reykjavik Declaration](#) (Council of Europe, Reykjavik Declaration “United around our values” 2023), reaffirmed the Organisation’s commitment to environmental protection.

The Council of Europe’s Youth Department has undertaken steps to promote ecologically neutral or positive youth mobility activities and projects. These include [the consultative meeting “The climate crisis, young people and democracy”](#), the establishment of a task force on greening the youth sector by the CMJ, and resources such as the European Youth Foundation’s Guidelines towards Environmental Sustainability for Projects (2014). The European Youth Centres in Strasbourg and Budapest have also implemented a range of initiatives to ensure sustainable and green activities, including Meatless Mondays in Budapest, the use of non-disposable cups and cutlery, the introduction of water fountains in city centres, and providing bicycles to participants (Council of Europe 2023).

The EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership has developed several resources, including the [T-Kit on Sustainability and Youth Work](#) (EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership 2018), a [Sustainability Checklist](#) (EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership, Neringa Tumėnaitė 2021) to be used by youth organisations as well as policy makers and decision makers when funding sustainable projects and investing in sustainable youth initiatives, and the analytical paper [“Disobedient youth: lessons from the youth climate strike movement”](#) (Gorman 2021).

While this concept paper cannot make a precise comparison between the environmental costs of youth learning mobility and of other sectors, based on previous findings it is more than reasonable to



conclude that it is more environmentally friendly in comparison with mobility-related activities in other sectors (i.e. tourism, private sector, public administration, labour and individual activities).

As previously analysed, the main actors (young people) are more aware of climate change, and feel personally more responsible for the impact of their actions on environment. They are more willing than other age groups to change their habits to reduce their environmental impact. Secondly, environmental protection is one of the key priorities of youth learning mobility programmes, thus raising awareness of the need for sustainable action. Finally, youth learning mobility as a sector has self-critically started a process of revision and transformation to minimise its negative environmental impact. This has resulted in the development of guidelines and implementation of concrete measures for reducing the environmental costs of learning mobility.

### Benefits and limitations of “online mobility/exchange”

One of the alternatives to youth learning mobility often proposed in the field is moving learning activities to online spaces. However, it would be questionable, both etymologically and conceptually, to refer to online learning activities as “mobility” activities. What or who “moves” in online learning activities? Is there any change of situation, context, role or place in this kind of activity? It could be argued that so called “online mobility” is in fact a “virtual” and not a “real” kind of mobility.

Different arguments for considering “online learning activities” as “mobility” activities, on the basis of different definitions of mobility, were explored in the paper [“Types of learning mobility – Blended, hybrid and online”](#) (EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership, Baclija Knoch 2022). The conclusion is that the “exchange” is present in online activities but that the “leaving for learning” element is missing. For these reasons, it would be more appropriate to talk about online learning exchange when referring to those activities.

It is important to recognise that online exchange also has its pros and cons.

The main identified benefits of “online learning exchange” in [“Types of learning mobility – Blended, hybrid and online”](#) (EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership, Baclija Knoch 2022) are:

- “An opportunity to engage in a cross-cultural exchange for young people who wouldn’t be able to participate in residential mobility due to certain limitations (geographic, economic, challenges with personal mobility, personal responsibilities at home etc.).
- A chance to connect transcontinentally. Having participants from different continents in a residential activity is often very expensive and sometimes quite challenging due to visa and other administrative procedures and recently Covid-19 restrictions. With online learning exchange, besides the time zone, there are no obstacles for participants joining from different continents.
- Online learning is a good entry point to ‘warm up’ to international co-operation and exchange. For many young people, it is less of a challenge to participate in an online activity than to gather courage for a trip abroad. It might be easier to do an online learning exchange as the first step.

- They can popularise learning exchange by reaching larger numbers and more diverse target groups. In other words, ‘They can prepare, deepen, and extend physical exchanges, and, by reaching new populations and larger numbers, fuel new demand for physical exchange.’<sup>2</sup>
- A wonderful opportunity to bring one’s home, to the extent to which a learner feels comfortable about it, into the learning and exchange process. Their living/working environment, their family members, the sounds of their home, the objects that surround them, etc.
- Connect the learning to daily life/routine/habits/behaviours – make the learning immediately transferred and integrated into everyday behaviours.
- Flexibility of formats and timeframes. The online learning exchange process can combine synchronous and asynchronous activities, condensing or spreading them over time. In fact, online environments enable learning exchange to take place with the same group of participants over a period of several months.
- It is arguably more environmentally friendly, as there is no impact from travelling.”

The main identified cons of “online learning exchange” in the above-mentioned concept paper are:

- “No ‘learning by leaving’ and reduced opportunities to be fully immersed in other culture(s). In addition, by not distancing oneself from the home environment, there is a lesser chance to discover new aspects and identity layers of oneself.
- Possibly the biggest challenge to online learning exchange is the **digital gap** – unequal access to the internet and devices needed to participate in online exchange, as well as different levels of competences needed for participation. In addition, there is a need for at least one more person to manage the technical part of the online learning.
- Digital competences for support, leading, facilitating online learning exchange are still not as developed as some other competence areas and there is still quite some resistance among youth workers and others working with young people.
- Lack of common moments for informal learning, socialising, networking. By not sharing learning and living space, participants are rarely connected beyond ‘official learning hours’.
- Reduced (though not impossible) experience of sensing others.” (EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership, Baclija Knoch 2022).

In order to analyse whether or not “online learning exchange” can be an alternative to learning mobility, these pros and cons should be weighted and contextualised in the practice of the mobility programmes. There are significant research findings resulting from online learning during the time of the pandemic showing that learning is less complete in “online learning exchanges” than in in-person learning mobility activities.

For example, students in Poland suffered isolation and loneliness when studying online – the experience of speaking to a screen was described as very demotivating – and the social aspect of studying was missing, with very particular effects on motivation to study as well as mobility outcomes (FRSE Publishing House, Ewa Krzaklewska, Karolina Podgórska 2021). As the research report [“Erasmus+ during the COVID-19 pandemic – The experiences of Erasmus students in Poland”](#) (FRSE Publishing

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2. ERASMUS+ Virtual Exchange, available at [https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/about-virtual-exchange\\_en](https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/about-virtual-exchange_en), accessed 28 November 2021.

House, Agnieszka Rybińska, Michał Pachocki 2021) concludes, meeting new people is an important aspect of studying abroad, linked to its intercultural dimension, and university is an important place for making new acquaintances and maintaining social relations. Online classes do not constitute such a comfortable space for meeting new people, in particular for those whose classes are mostly passive lectures, without group work and opportunities for discussion. In 2021, various research papers presented in the seminar [“The evidence-based approach in Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps”](#) held in Warsaw, showed similar trends from the studies about youth work in Turkey and schools in Armenia.

The Comparative Research Report [“Effects and outcomes of the Erasmus+ Youth in Action Programme \(2014-2020\) from the perspective of project participants and project leaders”](#) (RAY Network 2020), in the section devoted to competency development, analyses in detail the acquired knowledge, skills, attitudes, actions and values in mobility activities. The analysis of these lists and the format and methods used in online activities lead to the conclusion that the acquiring of new knowledge (i.e. on cultural diversity, youth, youth work, democracy) and the development of some skills (i.e. to communicate in other languages, to think logically and draw conclusions) are relatively easily achievable online, while other skills (i.e. to get along with people from a different cultural background, to express oneself creatively or artistically) and most of the attitudes (i.e. appreciation of cultural diversity, participation in democratic/political life), are not.

This difficulty for the further development of attitudes and values in online activities, due to the lack of direct personal communication, is a permanent challenge and has been identified in numerous evaluations. In the 2020 [survey on the impact of Covid-19 on learning mobility activities of the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps activities](#) (European Commission 2020), compared to physical mobility activities, the large majority of surveyed participants (81%) reported that they missed the person-to-person interaction.

This incomplete and unbalanced learning achievement in terms of attitudes and values in online activities has negative consequences not just at personal level in the personal growth of participants. It undermines some of the most appreciated outcomes of mobility (i.e. autonomy, maturity, networking with peers, participating in community activities) and makes the achievement of some of the ultimate aims (i.e. European awareness, youth participation and inclusion) more difficult. Additionally, the motivation and, consequently, the impact and sustainability of the activities is also affected.

## Conclusions

On the basis of the previous analysis and context, it can be concluded that “online mobility/exchange” is not a satisfactory alternative to learning mobility activities, neither in terms of learning (particularly in terms of attitudes and values) nor for the achievement of its ultimate objectives, the impact and the sustainability of the activities. It can be concluded that while the technical and co-ordination meetings can be satisfactorily replaced by online encounters, activities with a strong learning component and/or personal interaction should not.

Considering the still persisting negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people, not just in their learning but also on their mental health and social lives, it would be unfair to limit experiences and programmes that are particularly valuable for young people's lives.

There is nevertheless considerable room for improvement and for minimising the environmental costs of learning mobility activities without undermining their value. The next steps in that direction would be to systematise and generalise at all levels already existing and quite widespread strategies and good practices. Some examples of these can be found at a more structural level in the [Research for CULT Committee – Effective measures to “green” Erasmus+, Creative Europe and European Solidarity Corps programmes](#) (Buiscool Bert-Jan, Hudepohl Marye, European Commission, Directorate-General for Internal Policies 2020):

- the setting of a baseline describing the contribution of youth mobility programmes to environmental goals;
- consolidating existing good practices/incentives developed by the implementing institutions;
- the further promotion of environmental forms of travel, with different trade-offs;
- the improvement of indicators and tools for measuring the environmental impact of programme activities.

At a more practical level, many tips, good practices and strategies can be found in the outcomes of the [Green Erasmus](#) and [Erasmus goes green](#) projects, or the Youth Partnership's [Sustainability Checklist](#) (EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership, Neringa Tumėnaitė 2021). These cover, among other aspects: travelling, luggage, accommodation, food, energy, furniture and equipment, the use of a carbon footprint calculator, and other measures to be taken by organisers.

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