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Confronting challenges of recent changes in social science education in Sri Lankan university system

Abstract
This study analyses the challenges of recent changes in Sri Lankan higher education concerning social sciences and how those challenges can best be tackled. There is a strong sentiment that universities in Sri Lanka is in a state of constant crisis, as rising demand for higher education is not being met, despite its growing importance on the sustainable development agenda. This criticism focuses on higher education concerning social sciences and humanities, in terms of their relevance in the market economy. The mismatch between the needs of society and courses offered by universities has contributed to a high level of graduate unemployment. A mixed research method was employed in this research and the analyzed data were supported providing some secondary data. The paper discusses that challenges stemming from recent changes in higher education in social sciences are often related to transformed and reinterpreted expectations of university education and about approaches to university education. Maintaining and improving education quality, improving the relevance of curricula at a time of rapid changes in the market economy, accommodating societal needs, and going along with dynamic nature of global higher education are some of the challenges lead to an unstable situation in the social science education unless appropriately dealt with.

Keywords: challenges of change, higher education, market needs, reflections

Introduction

There is a strong sentiment that universities in Sri Lanka is in a state of constant crisis (Amarasooriya, 2015; Udayanga, 2018), as rising demand for higher education is not being met, despite its growing importance on the sustainable development agenda (UNESCO, 2015; United Nations, 2017). Once the 2030 agenda of Sustainable Development Goals introduced as a global policy framework that should be ratified at local levels so that the higher education has become an important theme even for a knowledge economy (Altbach, 2011), which can be employed as a better strategy for the socio-economic development of country (Mendis, 2012). Countries with relatively a higher GDP and those who allocate at least over four percent of their budgets for higher education have been able to achieve that ambitious goal, i.e. setting the society so that rising demand for higher education is fulfilled satisfactorily (Olssen & Peters, 2005).

Higher education is an advanced stage of the life-long learning process, and UNESCO (2016) asserts that the quality life of people who are committed to fulfilling their own needs and the needs expected by society can be realized only if they are given sufficient education which is appropriately organized and systematically planned. The early vision that the higher education is committed for emancipation from narrow views of life has been changed over the past few years (Tilak, 2015), and now its vision has been directed toward entrepreneurial gains (Jibeen & Khan, 2015). Now it is believed that the higher education should not be limited to providing knowledge, skills and attitudes so that students are prepared to encounter unprecedented events in their future life, but ability to provide dynamic catalysts who are more adaptive to constantly changing modern global world order is a matter of concerns to the contemporary higher education in the world (World Bank, 2018). Universities and other institutions across the globe thus captured this paramount requirement of the fast-changing global society and strived to incorporate potentially appropriate strategies into higher education, even though still the developing world has not been observed a significant success due to different reasons ranging from economic issues to colure bound mal-practices (Yat, Lo, Yat, & Lo, 2017).

Recently articulated policies and strategies regarding higher education by some of the funding agencies such as the World Bank, IMF (International Monetary Fund) have encouraged countries to concern more on quality dimension of the higher education and compelled to implement strategies such as strengthening market relevance and linkages with the development process, Supporting STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) Education, Rethinking financing to improve equity and efficiency, leveling up the playing field and the kind. Even BRICS- a newly established economic cooperation among five countries from the developing world has also raised

the importance of STEM education embedded not only in the school curriculum but in the higher education process would facilitate acquire expected development goals while reducing perilous social issues grounded in the developing world (New Development Bank, 2019).

Concern on social sciences in higher education has been decreasing as science-technology-engineering and mathematics are getting prominence in the recent policy changes, even though some attempts have been endeavoured to incorporate social sciences into the higher education because compromising social sciences for STEM education would cause unexpected challenges among students, and ultimately among those who will be employed as citizens (Lezaun, 2005; Yat et al., 2017). Singapore thus has recently implemented a university (Singapore University of Social Sciences) entirely dedicated to social science education, though it offers subjects that are more relevant to the contemporary needs of society. However, the developing world still encounters challenges not only about social science education but within the whole process of provision of higher education to their citizens (Gopinathan, 2007).

Nevertheless, Sri Lankan higher education is at a crossroad, in that sense the public spending on higher education is considerably minimum, while the education process is impairing as students politics severely influenced by the country's leftist political parties hinder the progress of university education. On the other hand, internal rivalry among academics and administration, law quality of the academics, teaching and courses offered by universities particularly in the globalized market economy again cause the low quality of graduates. This would be a telling issue, as the job market would again question the credibility and suitability of those graduates when they seek jobs by their field of interests (World Bank, 2017). Nonetheless, the importance of social sciences has lost their prominent place within the university system since the ultimate objective expected from graduates has been transformed reflecting the changing societal needs, i.e. the objective of university education has now been transformed from emancipation to employability (White, 1997). This would challenge the place of social sciences, despite its vital contribution to the university curriculum and society. Social science education is vital to higher education since it complements the hard sciences, also, it contributes to a harmonious and well-arranged society (UNESCO, 2013). Importance of the pure sciences and industry-oriented subjects has been elevated because of the recent industrial growth and government policy initiations, but they contribute only for technical purposes or more pragmatic needs of the society, though it does not completely fulfil the societal needs as the society requires healthier human relationships and emotional intelligence which facilitate the social order (UNESCO, 2013). Despite its importance social sciences seem to have been displaced from their

earlier authoritative position to a corner even in the government policies in the modern higher education system (Senaratne, 2014). The place of social science has declined, while industry-oriented subjects are getting considerable attention from society and the industry-public sectors. This might result in a crisis in higher education institutes that teach social sciences, also, the crisis would be severe in the faculties teaching humanities as the relevancy of humanities in the industry-oriented society is substantially less.

Nonetheless, the importance of humanities is immeasurable in terms of heritage conservation, developing healthier human relationships, and perpetuating the identity of the country. Therefore, prioritizing the scientific and industry-oriented subjects by placing them at the top does not solely guarantee the expected qualities of a modern-dynamic graduate who would be suitable in the industrial economy of the country. However, as the importance of social sciences decreases, particularly in the public-funded universities, this would cause some unexpected catastrophes in the entire higher education system (Udayanga, 2018). And hence, this paper analyses the challenges of recent changes in Sri Lankan higher education concerning social sciences and how those challenges can best be tackled.

Method

A mixed method research approach was employed in the research; in addition, some statistics were provided where necessary. The research focuses more on qualitative data since it reflects the real-world experiences of different stakeholders in the higher education sector concerning the matters of social science education. A mixed method approach, therefore, has been employed alongside secondary data obtained from University Grants Commissions (UGC) reports, UNESCO institute of statistics(UIS) data, and World Bank Open Data. Nine experienced-university-academics from different disciplines were interviewed (through online and face-to-face discussions), and two focus group discussions with students (from social science faculties) were conducted to obtain the data. Also, three human resource managers from private sector industries were interviewed. The in-depth interviews and focus group discussions focused more on understanding highly experienced academics' reflections upon their academic carrier and thoughts toward social science education. Focus group discussion with students revealed students' reflections on social science education. Collected data thus were analyzed thematically and supported by basic statistics provided by different organizations above mentioned.

Sri Lankan higher education in social sciences

Though the university education is considered as an essential pathway that facilitates knowledge economy of a country to reach sustainable

development goals, some changes of the entire higher education system in Sri Lanka are likely to damage the performance of the higher education process. When global values prevailed and accepted as valid norms by society, pillars of higher education might be changed, which would result in some challenges, which should be strategically tackled. One of the main challenge that the contemporary higher education in Sri Lanka encounter is changing the place of social sciences to accommodate market norms within the university curricular. Due to influences of industrialization, the place of social sciences within the university curricular has been critically questioned, as the extent to which the social sciences contribute to the economic development of the country is significantly minimized. Therefore, both the government and private industries encourage universities to produce globally competent graduates so that they can be employed. The increasing number of industries and growing attention toward entrepreneurship continuously demand innovative graduates with entrepreneurial qualities, though the capability of social sciences to inculcate those expected entrepreneurial qualities in the graduates is less as the driving philosophy of social science curricular is different from a market-oriented curriculum. This would transform the place of social sciences, and that could even challenge its existence.

> We do not need graduates with just a memory, but a thinking capacity. Since we live in a globalized world, everyone should acquire at least a skill that can be employed, otherwise finding a job in the market is difficult. (A private sector Manager)

> Recently the department decided to recruit Social Work graduates, but earlier we recruited sociology graduates. Now we have realized that when social work graduates are recruited, they perform in their duty well since they know how to perform professionally. Though sociologists are good, they do not have professional training, so that they could not perform well compared to social work graduates. (A public Sector Administrator)

The growing awareness toward the economic development of the country and an increasing number of private-sector employment opportunities have signaled the universities to revise their curricular accommodating market needs, though social science academics failed that challenge largely because of its inherent difficulty to adjust with the market needs. However, private and public sector stakeholders have asserted the importance of teaching market-oriented subjects, and revising existing curricula so that it can accommodate the rising expectation of private and public sector industries. Some of the

social science subjects have been revised by contemporary needs, though a large number of subjects could not be adjusted in line with transformed expectations. For example, *applied sociology, social policy and administration* have been introduced to the sociology curriculum in some of the universities, even though some have not even revised the decades-old curriculum.

Admission to public universities is more competitive since the undergraduate degree is offered free of charge. The University Grants Commission (UGC), therefore, administers the entire university system including the university admission, so that the students are given placements according to their performance in the Advanced Level Examination. Those who score high marks can request a placement at any university as they wish, but the majority of the students are placed in universities by the UGC. There are fifteen UGC administered universities in the country, and their curriculum is different from each other though they are based on Subject Bench Mark Statement (SBMS). SBMS is provided by the UGC, but each university can ratify it according to their needs and specialties. Consequently, the way of teaching and the content of subjects might be different from one university to another, though the core area is common. This would again affect the social science graduates, as some universities have revised their curriculum by market needs while some have not.

Table 1: Number of students admitted to different undergraduate courses from 2012 to 2015

Year of the Examination	Arts	Commerce	Physical Science	Biological Science	Engineering Technology	Biosystem Technology
2012	**7995**	4966	5043	6129	NA	NA
2013	**8227**	5225	5228	6376	NA	NA
2014	**8617**	5299	5287	6316	Na	NA
2015	**9891**	5441	5374	6288	1130	2906

Source: UGC Statistics Book, 2018

Furthermore, societal needs and the policy decisions made at higher levels are not parallel, in that sense the increasing demand for industry-oriented subjects have not given a sufficient number of placements, while a large or exceeding number of placements are allocated for social science studies (Table 1 & Table 2). Undergraduate enrolment in Arts (which includes social sciences, arts, and humanities) is substantially higher at the rate of 31 percent, which is double that of agriculture and medicine. Sri Lanka among many other Asian countries has placed at the top in the enrolment rate for social sciences (Table 7). This would be more problematic as graduates would not be able to be employed in the end, despite having some social science knowledge which is not directly relevant in the industrial workplaces. The enrolment rate in the advanced level (in schools) in the social sciences has also

been significantly higher than in other subject areas (Table 3). This trend continues to even postgraduate levels (Table 2).

Recently developed countries such as South Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong like Asian countries have revised their higher education system by the recent changes of the society, but Sri Lanka still fails to revise the admission policy in line with current needs. This is a challenging issue since the UGC cannot sometimes intervene as the student politics might damage the proper process of the entire university system by protesting that discussion. In 2018 the UGC decided to reduce the number of placements for Buddhist Studies, but the decision was rescinded due to protests by the politicized university students' associations. The crisis about social sciences initially emanates from the ineffective-policies made at the UGC level, but blaming the UGC would not be worth, because policymaking at the UGC level has been highly influenced by political decisions.

Table 2: Undergraduate and Postgraduate Enrolment, by Discipline, 2014

Discipline	Undergraduate Enrolment	Share (%)	Postgraduate Enrolment	Share (%)
Arts	**25,873**	**31**	**9,332**	**29**
Management, Commerce, and Law	19,741	24	8,968	28
Medicine, dental, Veterinary, Indigenous Medicine, Paramedical	10,201	12	2,839	9
Agriculture	3,884	5	1,190	4
Science, IT, Engineering, and Architecture	23,509	28	7,054	22
Education	NA	NA	2,335	7
Total	83,208	100	31,718	100?

Source: UGC Statistics Book, 2014

Placement of social sciences in the market has been critically questioned by some social scientists, though some attempts have been made. Even though it is difficult to adjust social sciences in line with the modern norms, new subjects have been introduced to the existing curriculum that would harness the graduates with some entrepreneurial qualities. However, this is not common to all universities.

> Social science is the heart of the entire university system, without social sciences university education is worthless. That liberates the graduates from the wrong world visions so that their emotional intelligent quotient is good. We need graduates with soft skills as well as hard skills. Social sciences provide soft skills to graduates, therefore they can work at any place in harmony. (An academic: held an administrative position)

Some lectures from faculty of social sciences have been appointed to those positions even without qualifications. They are lack of good command in English; sometimes, they do not have even a proper postgraduate qualification. Therefore, it would be difficult to revise the curriculum since those people would indirectly or directly reluctant to it. They seem to be feared as though they would lose their jobs soon after introducing new subjects to the curriculum. (An academic: Faculty of Science)

Even in the Senate (governing body of a university) meetings, social sciences and lecturers who teach social sciences are belittled. When funds are allocated social science faculties get a small piece of the cake when compared to other disciplines. (An academic: social science)

There is an ironic sentiment among non-social science academics that social sciences and humanities are not taught well in the university system. When policies are made at the university level, a large number of those extremist academics sometimes raise the voice-over social scientists representing the internal politics within the university. This is particularly because of the lack of good command in the English language of social scientists in the university system when compared to other academics. Since higher-level meeting at the university level is conducted in the English medium, that would overpower the voice of social science academics. Furthermore, the sentiment among social science academics that the universities should not act as an industrial organization that produces goods, but a dynamic place which facilitates students to liberate from narrow views of the world that they suppose to live. This ideology strongly damages its place in the market economy, since a large number of academics reluctant to revise the existing curricular to accommodate rising demands of the society.

The claim for teaching and giving prominence to social science has been widely accepted over the history of Sri Lankan higher education. This ideology, however, is no longer acceptable in the modern-day, as social science alone cannot guarantee the employability of graduates. The current practice among university system is to offer social science degrees separately so that a multidisciplinary approach to higher education has been decreased. Some faculties including management, medicine, and engineering adopted the multidisciplinary practice, though still, social science faculties have not initiated it. For example, the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Ruhuna established a multidisciplinary department that teaches different

social sciences and humanities, and that is integrated with the main discipline. Although, multidisciplinary collaboration is far more convincing, there? identified some obstacles within social science faculties as to how multidisciplinary collaboration is incorporated. Also, different nostalgic thoughts among academics would hinder the innovative policy decisions at the university level severely.

Table 3: Student Distribution, by Discipline Groups, 2014

Discipline Group	GCE A levels (%)	University Undergraduate Enrolment (%)
Social Sciences	**73**	**55**
Science, technology, engineering, and math.	33	28

Source: UGC Statistics Book, 2014

Some universities have strived to incorporate multidisciplinary collaboration in the social sciences faculties and that appeared to be more effective (Table 4), though incorporating non-social sciences is problematic. Faculties of Medicine provide their students to learn sociology, psychology, public administration, community development, and some other social sciences and humanities since it complements medical education when they work in society. Social science graduates, on the contrary, do not involve any complementary set of skills which would more useful once they graduate, since the allocation of time for some market-oriented subjects is considerably less within the given credit framework. Nonetheless, some universities have incorporated a very? less number of courses having a market value in the social science curricular, though that does not provide a sufficient amount of knowledge for the students.

Table 4: Newly added subjects to the sociology curriculum in different universities

University	Introduced Subject
University of Peradeniya	Applied Sociology, Social Policy and Administration, Participatory Research and Development, Sociology of Computing
University of Ruhuna	Organizational Management, Proposal Writing and Workshop Planning, Sociology of Counselling
University of Colombo	Social Work stream for sociology students
University of Jaffna	Refugee Studies, Peace studies- Concepts and theories, Critical Studies in Mass media

Source: Sociology curriculum in mentioned universities

Lack of collaboration with the industry sector and the public sector is another challenge the social science academics encounter. The industrial sector more often seeks for graduates who are competent enough to work in an industrial environment that requires technical knowledge that? of social science knowledge, and hence industrial organizations are more likely to have collaborations with faculties offering more industry-oriented degrees. As the

contribution of social sciences for industries is considerably less, there is a deficit in collaboration between industry sector and social science faculties. Even though some of the social science-related subjects would contribute to the industry sector in different dimensions, still the collaboration with industries is minimum.

> We allow students to engage in internship activities, but opportunities are more competitive as the place for social science students is very less. As a part of the degree programme, we are supposed to include an industrial training programme, which would provide an opportunity to practice learned theories practically in the real environment, but most of the time we deal with NGOs as now we have partnerships with some NGOs providing social work support for the people. (An Academic)

The recent policy initiatives have strived to make collaborations with NGOs because social science related subjects are more relevant in the achievement of their missions. An increasing number of Non-government organizations provide social science graduates with opportunities to work with the community and social development, though again the partnership among university students, academics, and those organizations is noticeably minimum. However, when the NGO sector prevails in the country and overseas, there is an increasing demand for social science graduates as they are more suitable enough to work with communities appropriately. Nevertheless, the policymakers at the university level have not captured this tremendous opportunity.

Furthermore, vernacular higher education has constricted to social science education only, in the sense the medium of instruction employed when social sciences are taught is *Sinhalese* or *Tamil* (Mother tongue). All the other subjects are offered in the English medium, so that those who are graduated in non-social sciences and humanities are highly likely to be employed, because of the English language proficiency. Some universities conduct social science subjects in English, but a small number of students follow degree programmes in the English medium. They are sometimes more employable than those who follow the degree programme in the native language.

> Since we are learning in English, we can at least find a job in an embassy or a private company. However, we know that finding a job that pays sufficient amount of wage is quite difficult for the students learning in the Sinhalese medium. In

the end, the knowledge does not matter, but it will be the language proficiency. (From focus group discussions)

Some attempts have been made to deliver lectures in the English medium; but the focus toward teaching through the English language has been problematic, as learning in a non-native langue sometimes has contributed to the decreasing quality of graduates. Lack of command in English of the majority of the teachers in the faculties of arts and social sciences in several universities is largely responsible for this situation, and it has produced graduates with poor professional and working knowledge in English. The proficiency in English is an essential requirement for both private and public sector organizations so that the lack of command in English besmirched the value of the degree offered to social science graduates, consequently, the underemployment and unemployment have increased (Table 5).

Table 5: Labour force participation and unemployment rates, selected Asian countries as of 2016

Country Group	Labour force participation rate (%)	Unemployment rate (%),
Sri Lanka	**52**	**5**
Malaysia	63	3
Singapore	67	2
Thailand	71	1
South Korea	80	4
India	54	3

Source: World Development Indicators, 2017

One of the other telling challenges is that the low level of funding for research, scholarship, and foreign exposure in the faculties of social sciences that hinders its contribution to society. When the budget is prepared by the UGC, considerably less amount of money is allocated for social science researches. On the other hand, scholarships for academic staff and students are rare which is further hindered by their lack of English knowledge. Proficiency in English has been considered as a major requirement for international scholarships, though many of the academics do not consist of a good command in English.

Table 6: Distribution of teaching staff and their educational qualifications, by different disciplines

Academic Discipline	1st Degree & Postgraduate Diploma		Master Degree		MPhil Degree		Doctoral Degree	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Veterinary Medicine	4	10	5	12.5	3	7.5	28	70
Engineering	77	14.4	96	17.9	39	7.3	323	60.4
Indigenous Medicine	19	15.7	8	6.6	21	17.4	73	60.3
Arts & HSS	**118**	**9.2**	**391**	**30.5**	**276**	**21.6**	**495**	**38.7**

Source: UGC Statistics Book, 2018

Foreign exposure provides academic staff the ability to perceive the current placement of their engagement in the discipline world widely, which would harness the quality of degree programmes and the quality of graduates. Since lack of foreign exposure with the staff members in the arts stream (that includes social sciences, humanities, and arts) hinders the advancement of the subject, which in turn would cause the decline of the quality of degree programmes to a greater extent. Also, a large number of lecturers have obtained their postgraduate qualifications locally, so that it would be difficult to strengthen international partnerships with foreign universities and academics. Although convincingly a sufficient number of Ph.D. holders remain at the Arts, Humanities and Social Science faculties, most of them are about to retire from the service very soon. Also, compared to other faculties percentage of the Ph.D. holders are considerably minimum in the Arts and Social Science faculties.

Table 7: Higher education enrolment in Humanities by Discipline groups, in selected Asian countries 2012

	Humanities and Arts	*Science, Engineering, Manufacture, and Construction*
Sri Lanka	**49.7**	**17.2**
Kore, Rep.	18.2	35.2
Singapore	9.4	40
Malaysia	8.5	34.8
Thailand	7.4	18.2
Vietnam	5.7	23.6
India	5.6	**38.8**
Indonesia	0.5	24.2

Source: UIS, 2012

Though the contribution of social sciences is important to the society, the societal requirements must be matched with the policies regarding discipline management, in the sense more demanding subjects shall be given prominence, but not compromising the social sciences. India, Malaysia and

South Korea like Asian countries have revised their policies to accommodate recent societal needs in their university curricular consequently the number of students who recruited to arts stream has declined substantially (Table 6), though Sri Lanka still gives a prominent place to social sciences over other disciplines, that would indirectly hinder the progress of social science education too.

Furthermore, the decreasing enthusiasm and increasing frustration of students in the social science faculties is another challenge. Since the sentiment that though they learn hard, at the end finding a job would be difficult to decrease the enthusiasm of students to engage in the academic activities largely, which causes the frustration of students and that sometimes might contribute to the violent protest movements within the university system. The participation of the students from arts faculties (including social science and humanities) in different universities in protest movements is considerably higher than those who are from non-arts faculties. Therefore, the self-motivation among social science learning students for their academic activities seems to be demeaning, which would harmful to them even after they have graduated.

The research endeavoured to find and understand the challenges of social science education in the university system in Sri Lanka and have been thematically presented. Reflections of the study implied that separating social sciences from the other disciplines would demean its value in contemporary society, and hence the multidisciplinary approach shall be implemented to elevate the quality of graduates. On the other hand, double degree programmes can be implemented specifically for social science faculties. This requires strategic planning and effective policy reforming.

Graduate students can be encouraged to follow social science degrees alongside some other market-oriented subjects. For example, the University of Harvard encourages Sociology postgraduate students to work with public policies so that once they graduate, the knowledge acquired through sociology can employ even in the public administration. Surprisingly, there is a low-level of collaboration even within social sciences in Sri Lanka. Therefore, universities should think to incorporate different subjects within the social sciences with a properly planned graduate profile. For example, the undergraduate dissertation can be collaboratively supervised (Sociology and Public Policy/ Psychology and Buddhist Studies). Moreover, building collaborations with NGOs, Industries, and Public sector organizations is very important, since universities can get help from them to provide industrial training for the students. Thinking of collaborating with foreign universities would be another possible strategy that would decrease the crisis in social science education.

Conclusion

Social Science stream is an important subsection in higher education since it contributes to the inculcation of soft skills in the graduates. Both soft skills and hard skills are equally important, in the sense solely a single aspect does not guarantee the quality of the graduates. Despite its importance, there are several issues in social science education, particularly in the public sector universities, as its authoritative place within the university system has been gradually decreasing. Alongside the social change, the expectations of higher education are being changed tremendously, while accommodating contemporary societal needs in their curriculum. The increasing demand for graduates who would be employed in the industry sector likely to diminish the place of social sciences in higher education in Sri Lanka. Several other obstacles analyzed above would support this, further.

Sri Lankan higher education concerning social sciences is in a state of crisis, because of several reasons that emanate from the process or structural dimensions of the higher education of which revising the existing social science curricular must be the highest priority, but this has been procrastinated because of the academics' reluctance and internal politics. Also, there have been identified several other obstacles which hinder the curriculum revision process regarding social sciences.

Furthermore, the lack of multidisciplinary collaboration has alienated the social sciences from even the university administration. Similarly, less number of partnerships with private and public sector organizations delay the advancement and effective adjustment of the social science curricular reflecting the societal needs. Sometimes, the low level of quality among social science graduates has been caused by the complexity of the Arts/Social Science stream, which means; some of the social sciences are more relevant in modern-day while some are not relatively. Vernacular education, on the other hand, is constricted within higher education only for social sciences and humanities, which in turn would result in some unexpected problems. To address those issues, collaborative and strategic policy planning is essential.

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