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Demystifying Artificial Intelligence (AI): A Student-Led Framework for Effective AI Integration in Higher Education Leadership Development

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Demystifying Artificial Intelligence (AI): A Student-Led Framework for Effective AI Integration in Higher Education Leadership Development

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Track: Leadership and leadership development track

Summary:
This developmental paper presents a student-led framework for the effective integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in Higher Education (HE) to prepare future decision-makers and leaders. Data were collected via an online questionnaire from 44 postgraduate students—current professionals based in Albania, the UK, and Greece. The findings informed the design of the framework and offer insights into how students perceive the role of AI in leadership preparation. Grounded in ethical and adaptive leadership theories, the framework supports the development of skills and mindsets necessary to lead through AI-driven change. Notably, 88% of respondents highlighted the need for ongoing professional development to build both AI literacy and leadership capabilities. While exploratory in nature, the study contributes to the growing discourse on how GenAI can support the emergence of ethical, adaptive, and responsible leadership in HE contexts. The paper invites further research and institutional engagement with student-led approaches to AI integration in curricula and leadership development.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI); Higher Education; student-led framework; ethical leadership; adaptive leadership; leadership development; GenAI; Business and Management education

Word Count: 4.926 words

Introduction

Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) techniques, such as ChatGPT, have recently emerged as transformative digital tools within Higher Education (HE). These technologies hold significant potential to reshape educational landscapes, especially as they become more integrated into teaching, learning, and institutional processes. Gen AI can enhance digital pedagogy through various applications, including individualized learning pathways, automated assessment and feedback, virtual assistants and chatbots, content generation, ethical and adaptive leadership development, resource curation, productivity and time management, language translation and multilingual support, proofreading, editing, research guidance, simulations, and virtual laboratories (Chiu, 2024; Crawford et al., 2023; Nikolopoulou, 2025). Scholars argue that Gen AI not only facilitates operational efficiency but also promotes collaboration, enhances accessibility, supports students' emotional and intercultural intelligence, and nurtures transformational leadership capacities. Moreover, it fosters inclusivity and improves digital literacy in increasingly diverse and globalized HE environments (Bender, 2024; Chiu, 2024; Kazanidis & Pellas, 2024).

Despite these advantages, the integration of Gen AI in HE is not without risks and challenges. One major concern is the potential overreliance on automated feedback, which could replace critical educator-student interactions that are vital for cultivating higher-order thinking skills. Personalized, human-centered guidance remains especially important for international, multilingual, and multicultural student populations, who may depend on social and emotional connections in the classroom to thrive academically. Furthermore, Gen AI tools are only as reliable as the data they are trained on. This can lead to the reinforcement of existing societal biases, misinterpretation of cultural nuances, and the presentation of contextually irrelevant or oversimplified content—issues that threaten academic rigor and the development of deep, critical engagement (Wei et al., 2025; Bhandari, 2023).

Gen AI is also limited in addressing culture-specific content, often resulting in translation inaccuracies or communication misunderstandings, particularly for multilingual learners (Bender, 2024). Human interaction remains essential for developing students' emotional intelligence, linguistic competence, and intercultural sensitivity (Voss et al., 2023). Moreover, students report that simulated and virtual environments often fail to replicate the unpredictability and complexity of real-life events, limiting the authenticity of experiential learning, which is central to leadership development (Bozkurt et al., 2023). AI-mediated learning lacks the spontaneity, empathy, and humor characteristic of human interaction, which can hinder peer bonding, collaboration, and sustained engagement in team-based settings (Li et al., 2024).

However, the increasing accessibility of Gen AI tools such as ChatGPT offers unique opportunities for HE institutions to enhance academic engagement and learning outcomes, provided that students are equipped with the knowledge and competencies to use these tools responsibly. The development of students' AI and digital literacy, coupled with ethical and adaptive leadership capabilities, becomes a prerequisite to navigating the complex educational and professional landscape shaped by Gen AI. When used effectively, these technologies can support personalized, adaptive, and engaging learning experiences and contribute to broader goals such as sustainable development and inclusive education (Nguyen et al., 2024; Shwedeh et al., 2024; Sywelem, 2024). Moreover, digital technologies offer students opportunities to explore diverse sustainability practices and global business strategies, thereby enhancing their leadership, critical thinking, and intercultural competencies.

As AI continues to disrupt conventional business practices, leadership roles are being redefined. Future leaders must develop the capacity to manage and strategically deploy Gen AI tools in various organizational contexts. Drawing on ethical and adaptive leadership theories, this study contends that leadership in the age of Gen AI requires not only technical proficiency but also the capacity to guide others through periods of uncertainty and transformation (Heifetz et al., 2009). In this context, leaders must possess the skills to supervise AI-informed decision-making processes while ensuring that human judgment and ethical reasoning remain central to critical decisions.

To address this emerging need, postgraduate training programs in Business and Management schools must evolve to include targeted modules that prepare future leaders to harness Gen AI for organizational effectiveness (Sposato, 2024). This includes understanding how AI can streamline operations, support data-driven decisions, optimize resource allocation, and implement predictive analytics. Training should also emphasize the identification of internal processes where AI can automate routine tasks, thereby reallocating time and effort toward strategic, creative, and human-centered initiatives (Badmus et al., 2024). In addition, leaders must be trained to continuously monitor emerging technological trends, identify opportunities for innovation, and develop strategic foresight to proactively manage change rather than merely react to disruptions (Upadhyay and Khandelwal, 2019).

Incorporating Gen AI modules into postgraduate leadership curricula—grounded in ethical and adaptive leadership theories—can foster a culture of innovation, collaboration, and agility. Such training supports aspiring leaders in navigating the ethical complexities and practical challenges of Gen AI implementation. By doing so, HE institutions can cultivate leaders who are not only technologically proficient but also socially responsible, ethically grounded, and culturally aware.

This study responds to this pressing need by actively involving students in the co-construction of a student-led framework for the responsible and effective integration of Gen AI tools in Business and Management education. By prioritizing student perspectives, the research emphasizes the importance of inclusive, ethical, and socially just approaches to leadership development. The proposed framework aligns Gen AI capabilities with leadership theories and training needs, equipping future decision-makers with the tools and mindset to lead ethically and adaptively in AI-driven environments. As such, the study contributes to ongoing debates on the role of Gen AI in shaping the next generation of leaders and advancing the goals of equity and excellence in Higher Education.

Research Focus, Rationale, and Questions

Gen AI has been considered a priority in Higher Education (HE) nowadays, taking into account its potential to enhance students' academic performance, engagement, and productivity. Scholars argue that Gen AI tools are not meant to replace lecturers but rather to support them by reducing their workload and augmenting their teaching capacities (Chaika, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2022). As technological advancements continue at a rapid pace, students—especially aspiring leaders—must stay updated and lead the ethical and strategic integration of Gen AI into educational and professional environments (Alam, 2023; Schiff, 2022). This is critical not only for academic learning and assessment but also for fostering effective ethical and adaptive leadership in organisations and SMEs (Kumar, 2025; Udin, 2023).

Several Gen AI tools have been widely adopted in HE settings, offering varying advantages and disadvantages. ChatGPT, for instance, has become a favourite among students due to its capacity to personalise learning experiences and support independent study (Sajja et al., 2024). Students value these tools for enabling them to work at their own pace and improve their understanding and expression of complex concepts, ultimately enhancing their academic writing and performance (Marzuki et al., 2023). Additionally, Gen AI tools are frequently used in research contexts—for brainstorming, conducting literature reviews, and analysing data (Casal & Kessler, 2023).

When thoughtfully embedded into HE, Gen AI can promote creative and critical thinking, helping students approach real-world problems in innovative ways. However, these benefits come with risks. When used inappropriately or without adequate guidance, AI tools may hinder the development of essential lower-order thinking skills (How et al., 2023). Furthermore, concerns have been raised about unethical usage, particularly among postgraduate students who may unintentionally engage in plagiarism due to limited understanding of AI ethics (Chan, 2024).

Therefore, developing AI literacy among postgraduate students is essential. At the same time, preparing students to adopt adaptive and ethical leadership practices is crucial, especially as they transition into professional roles where they will need to lead the responsible integration of AI technologies. By fostering both technical competencies and leadership qualities, HE

institutions can ensure that graduates are well equipped to face the ethical, social, and organisational challenges of AI-powered workplaces (Shaikh, 2025).

AI in Higher Education and Pedagogy

The integration of Generative AI (Gen AI) into higher education (HE) is reshaping traditional models of teaching and learning, enabling more responsive, flexible, and student-centred approaches. AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and personalized tutoring systems have become commonplace, offering immediate feedback and supporting autonomous learning (Qianqian, 2024; Khan et al., 2025). This transformation reflects a broader shift towards technology-enhanced pedagogy, where digital tools augment human teaching capabilities and expand access to knowledge. Studies have highlighted that Gen AI has the potential to personalise learning at scale, enhance engagement, and support formative feedback practices, especially in postgraduate education (George, 2023).

However, these benefits come with important caveats. Concerns have been raised about the ethical use of AI, particularly regarding bias, data privacy, and unequal access to AI technologies (Rane, 2023). Without deliberate attention to equity, AI's integration may inadvertently reinforce existing educational inequalities. The literature strongly recommends that institutions not only integrate AI into their pedagogical strategies but also ensure inclusive access and ethical oversight (Cinar et al., 2024).

AI Literacy and Student Engagement

AI literacy is increasingly regarded as a core competency for students in the 21st century, encompassing not only technical understanding but also critical thinking, ethical awareness, and creative application (Qianqian, 2024). AI literacy goes beyond knowing how to use tools—it includes understanding how AI systems work, evaluating their outputs, and applying them responsibly. For postgraduate students, particularly those in business and leadership roles, developing AI literacy is critical not only for academic success but for professional relevance in AI-driven industries.

Recent research stresses the need for frameworks that guide learners through stages of AI engagement, such as understanding, applying, evaluating, and creating with AI. Yet many existing models remain abstract, lacking alignment with students' lived experiences or leadership development needs. This study responds to that gap by proposing a student-informed AI Literacy Pathway that incorporates these dimensions while foregrounding inclusion, ethics, and adaptive leadership.

Ethical, Adaptive, and Inclusive Leadership in the AI Era

The rise of AI technologies has prompted a re-evaluation of what constitutes effective leadership. Scholars have called for more adaptive, ethical, and compassionate forms of leadership that can navigate complexity and technological disruption (Cinar et al., 2024; George, 2023). Adaptive leadership emphasises responsiveness, continuous learning, and resilience—traits increasingly necessary in AI-transformed workplaces. Meanwhile, ethical

leadership underscores fairness, accountability, and social responsibility, especially when leaders are expected to make decisions involving AI systems.

Although a growing body of literature addresses the intersections between AI and leadership, most studies approach this from institutional or managerial perspectives. Few offer insights into how emerging leaders, particularly postgraduate students in business schools, are experiencing and conceptualising their own leadership development in relation to AI. This lack of bottom-up, student-centred research limits our understanding of how leadership competencies are evolving in AI-rich learning environments.

Gaps in AI–Leadership Integration Models

Despite the rapid expansion of literature on AI in education and leadership, there remains a disconnect between theoretical models and student practice. Existing AI integration frameworks often focus on curriculum design or institutional strategies, but they rarely consider the specific developmental needs of postgraduate students preparing to lead in AI-driven sectors. Moreover, few models incorporate inclusive and adaptive leadership dimensions in ways that reflect students' own experiences or address global challenges such as digital equity, cross-cultural collaboration, and sustainability.

This study aims to bridge these gaps by developing a student-led framework that integrates AI literacy with inclusive, ethical leadership development. Grounded in qualitative insights from postgraduate students across three European countries, the framework captures the evolving competencies needed for responsible leadership in a technologically mediated world.

Rationale for the Research Questions

Drawing from the literature reviewed above, this study identifies two key gaps: (1) the lack of AI literacy frameworks grounded in student experience, and (2) the absence of leadership development models that integrate ethical, inclusive, and adaptive practices within AI-rich contexts. To address these gaps, the study explores the following research questions:

1. How do postgraduate business students perceive the use of Gen AI tools in relation to their academic and leadership development?
2. What kinds of support, curriculum design, and leadership models do students believe are necessary to lead effectively in an AI-integrated professional future?

These questions are designed to generate exploratory insights that inform the development of an empirically grounded, student-informed framework—one that not only supports AI literacy but also contributes to the broader goals of inclusive leadership and sustainable educational innovation.

Research Methods and Research Questions

The present study explored postgraduate mature students'—specifically those holding leadership roles in organisations—perspectives on Generative AI (Gen AI) and leadership development. A qualitative methodology was employed, using an electronic survey comprising open-ended questions to gather rich, narrative data. Participant recruitment was conducted through a combination of snowball and convenience sampling. To maximise reach, the survey link was distributed across several online platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp groups. Participants were also encouraged to share the link within their professional and academic networks.

The decision to use an open-ended e-survey format was informed by both practical and theoretical considerations. Given the participants' professional commitments and the geographical dispersion across three European countries, asynchronous responses offered greater flexibility and inclusivity, enabling a broader range of voices to be heard. The survey's open-text design also allowed for reflective and candid responses, capturing nuanced perspectives that might not surface in time-constrained interviews or socially influenced focus groups. While this approach limits the opportunity for real-time probing, it was deemed the most feasible and contextually appropriate method for an exploratory study of this kind.

Prior to participation, all individuals received a detailed information sheet and consent form, which they were able to review before formally agreeing to take part. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study: confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and responses were treated with the highest level of privacy and care.

The study sample consisted of 44 postgraduate mature students based in the UK, Albania, and Greece. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. Two independent coders manually generated initial codes. Both coders reviewed the full dataset and were assigned the same subset of 20 responses to identify preliminary themes. Discrepancies between the coders were resolved through discussion and consensus. Based on this agreement, a finalised codebook was developed and used to code the remaining responses.

Preliminary Analysis and Initial Results from First Phase

In the first phase of the study, a combination of descriptive and thematic analysis was used to explore how postgraduate mature students, many of whom already held leadership roles, engage with Gen AI and how they perceive its role in leadership development. The initial findings offer insight into emerging expectations, challenges, and opportunities regarding AI integration in leadership education.

Participants widely described using Gen AI tools as "virtual tutors," particularly praising their accessibility and responsiveness. One student remarked, *"I use ChatGPT when I'm stuck on a*

concept. It's like having a tutor available 24/7." Another noted, *"Grammarly really helps me tighten up my assignments. It catches things I miss, and I've learned how to write more clearly."* These responses reflect the increasing role of AI in supporting autonomous and personalised learning experiences.

Students also emphasized how Gen AI tools contributed to their development as leaders. As one participant explained, *"Learning to use AI tools effectively made me more confident in making decisions—especially when it comes to problem-solving and managing team tasks."* Others viewed these tools as essential in building the type of adaptive thinking needed to thrive in complex, tech-driven environments.

A recurring theme was the call for a more structured, leadership-focused AI curriculum. One participant expressed this need clearly: *"We need a course that actually shows us how to use AI as a leader, not just the tech, but the strategy, the ethics, and how to support others to use it."* Another student urged institutions to keep pace with innovation: *"Universities should work with real experts—AI professionals and leadership coaches—so we don't fall behind."*

Several participants also suggested integrating experiential learning, such as leadership simulations involving AI scenarios. One said, *"I'd love to be put in a simulated environment where AI is part of the challenge—how do I lead a team during that? That's real preparation."*

These early insights reinforce the need for business schools to embed ethical, adaptive, and experiential approaches into leadership programmes. They also underscore the importance of co-designing learning environments that equip students to lead AI-integrated organisations with confidence, compassion, and strategic foresight.

Discussion Point and Further Development

The rapid advancement of generative AI (Gen AI) is reshaping the landscape of higher education (HE) and organisational leadership worldwide. This transformation offers unique opportunities for promoting inclusivity, sustainability, and innovation in educational and professional contexts (Rane, 2023). The present study addresses this evolution by proposing a structured and student-informed framework to support the ethical and purposeful integration of AI into postgraduate education, with a particular focus on leadership development.

Participants in this study consistently emphasized the dual necessity of acquiring both technical AI literacy and the adaptive leadership skills required to guide others through AI-induced change. Their responses reveal that Gen AI is not just a tool for academic enhancement but also a catalyst for rethinking leadership styles. One student noted, *"If I'm going to lead a team in the next five years, I need to understand not just how AI works but how to guide others ethically when using it."* This underscores the shift in leadership expectations—postgraduate students

are no longer preparing to lead static teams but are preparing for dynamic, tech-augmented environments that demand both technical fluency and emotional intelligence.

To address these evolving needs, the study introduces a conceptual framework (Figure 1) built upon five core stages of the **AI Literacy Pathway**: (1) *Understanding AI*, (2) *Applying AI*, (3) *Creating with AI*, (4) *Evaluating AI*, and (5) *Ethical AI Usage* (Qianqian, 2024). These stages aim to equip students with the knowledge and capabilities necessary to interact meaningfully and critically with AI technologies. Each stage promotes increasingly complex engagement with AI, from basic familiarity and application to the evaluation of ethical implications and responsible innovation.

Supporting this pathway are **four foundational layers**:

1. **Inclusion and Accessibility** – Ensuring that AI adoption addresses the needs of diverse learners, including those from underrepresented or digitally disadvantaged backgrounds.

2. **Collaboration** – Promoting peer-to-peer and interdisciplinary cooperation in AI-supported tasks and projects.

3. **Personalised Learning** – Leveraging AI tools to tailor academic experiences to individual learners' needs, goals, and learning paces.

4. **Adaptive, Ethical, Compassionate, and Inclusive Leadership** – Encouraging leadership development that is responsive to technological changes and grounded in ethical practice and social equity.

This integrated structure ensures that students do not merely learn *about* AI, but also how to use it to create inclusive, ethical, and sustainable solutions in real-world contexts. A participant summarised this well by stating, *"We need AI education that goes beyond the tech—that teaches us how to use it responsibly in our future roles as decision-makers."*

The framework also includes a component focusing on **AI for Education and Organisational Sustainability**. Participants frequently voiced the need to understand AI's potential in addressing global challenges, such as climate change, inequality, and resource scarcity. One respondent stated, *"AI can help businesses become more sustainable, but only if leaders know how to align its use with ethical goals."* This vision resonates with current calls in the literature for HE to promote digital sustainability (Khan et al., 2025).

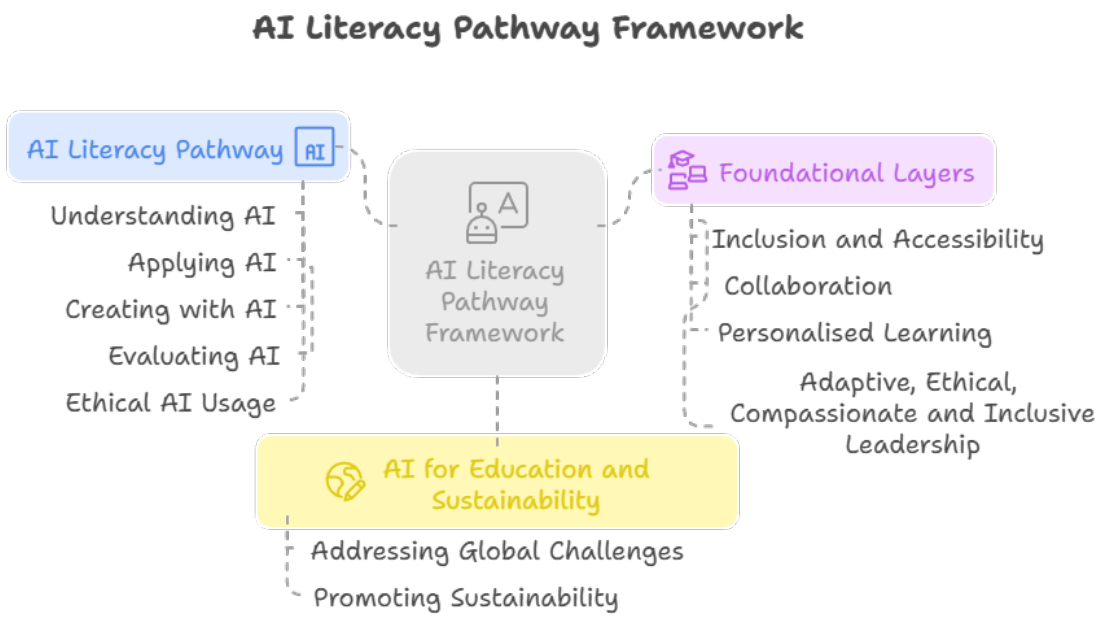

Figure.7¿The.Student.Framework.illustrates.the.AI.Literacy.Pathway?supported.by.inclusion?collaboration?leadership.development?and.personalised.learning.layers.to.promote.equitable.access.and.skill.development.in.HE

The study findings also emphasize the transformative potential of experiential learning. Participants expressed a strong preference for active learning methods that simulate real-world leadership challenges involving AI. These include digital storytelling, case-based problem-solving, and AI-related simulations. As one student put it, *"Being thrown into a simulation where AI disrupts the market or affects team dynamics—that's when I'll really learn how to lead."* These preferences align with George (2023), who argued that experiential and immersive techniques significantly enhance leadership development in digital contexts.

The proposed framework thus reflects a **student-driven reimagining** of HE curricula, integrating AI not as an isolated subject but as an embedded element of leadership education. It positions AI as a vehicle for achieving broader educational goals—namely, producing graduates who are ethical, adaptable, and prepared to lead responsibly in AI-integrated work environments. This is particularly relevant for business schools, where students are often already working professionals or aspiring entrepreneurs. Several participants emphasized the importance of AI literacy for assessing organisational readiness and shaping innovation strategies. One noted, *"I want to be able to lead my organisation through AI transformation without losing sight of our values or my team's well-being."*

Moreover, participants stressed the importance of **building and managing diverse, cross-functional teams** that are crucial for successful AI deployment. This suggests that leadership

education should not only teach students how to use AI tools but also how to facilitate inclusive teamwork, manage change, and navigate power dynamics in increasingly digitised workplaces. In response to these insights, this research advocates for HE institutions to **rethink leadership development models**. Curricula should embed modules on AI leadership, ethical and adaptive leadership, and the sociocultural implications of AI technologies. These modules should not be elective add-ons but core components of postgraduate training, particularly in business, management, and public policy programs.

Importantly, this framework does not position AI literacy and leadership as parallel tracks but as **interdependent competencies**. Leaders must be technologically literate to inspire confidence and make informed decisions, while technologists need leadership skills to ensure their innovations serve human values. The integration of these competencies prepares graduates to lead with both head and heart.

Figure 1 in the original manuscript illustrates the **AI Literacy Pathway Framework**, showing the interaction between AI skill development and the four pedagogical support layers. It is not a prescriptive model but a flexible guide adaptable to various institutional contexts.

Looking forward, this framework lays the foundation for future research and programme design. It invites further exploration into how AI-literacy competencies evolve over time and how they interact with cultural, economic, and disciplinary differences. Additionally, the study encourages HE institutions to develop partnerships with industry leaders, AI developers, and leadership coaches to co-create up-to-date and context-relevant learning materials.

In conclusion, this study affirms the transformative potential of AI in HE, not simply as a learning tool but as a catalyst for reimagining leadership education. By incorporating students' voices and aligning with recent scholarship, the proposed framework highlights a path forward: one where AI literacy, ethical leadership, and social responsibility converge to prepare graduates for the challenges and possibilities of the 21st century. As HE evolves, embracing these interconnected domains will be essential for cultivating resilient, innovative, and compassionate leaders capable of shaping equitable and sustainable futures.

Limitations and Areas for Further Research

While this study offers valuable insights into postgraduate students' perceptions of AI and leadership development, it is not without limitations. The findings are based on a specific cohort of postgraduate Business and Management students, which may not fully represent the broader student population across disciplines or geographic contexts. Moreover, the study relies on self-reported data, which may be influenced by social desirability bias or differing levels of prior exposure to AI tools. The framework presented, while grounded in participant feedback and existing literature, remains conceptual and requires further empirical validation through longitudinal or comparative studies. Future research could explore how these ideas translate

into practice across different cultural or institutional settings and assess the long-term impact of integrated AI-literacy and leadership programs on students' professional trajectories.

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