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ENHANCING
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RESEARCH
IN AFRICA (EERA)

Intervention 3:


Strengthening research and leadership capacity
through Research Chairs

NOVEMBER 2024

This concept note is one of eight developed as part of the Enhancing Education Research in Africa project. For an overview of the project and to view the other concept notes, please visit <https://essa-africa.org/node/1831>.

This concept note describes a proposed intervention to fund Research Chairs in the field of education research at higher education institutions in Africa. Research Chairs are funded academic positions that support academic institutions to advance research. Typically, the roles and responsibilities of Research Chairs include activities such as conducting research within their field, teaching, mentoring students, managing research grants and building general research capacity within their host institutions.

This intervention is designed to be part of a [wider system of interventions](#). It was identified through an intensive consultation and participative planning process with African education researchers and policy-makers, who highlighted the need to strengthen research leadership and capacities as a strategic leverage point.

 To maximise effectiveness, [Intervention 3](#) should be implemented alongside the proposed [Intervention 4](#) 'Strengthening administrative capacities of research institutions'.


Please visit the EERA project page at bit.ly/30OssDV.

Why is this a crucial intervention for education research in Africa?

Research Chair Initiatives have been used globally to strengthen research systems (UNESCO, 2022). While there are several [examples of such initiatives](#) on the continent (read more on page 5), none of them currently focus specifically on education research.

Education-specific Research Chairs have the potential to play a pivotal role in enhancing research capacity and expertise within African universities. Specifically, creating Research Chair positions at African universities will help to build a strong field for education research in the following ways:

- ➔ Research Chairs provide a platform for developing and deepening the **knowledge base** of African tertiary institutions, by attracting researchers to produce high-quality, rigorous education research outputs. This intervention can catalyse much-needed research in emerging fields and encourage skilled individuals to stay within host institutions. Evidence shows that Research Chair positions help to strengthen research quality and build research capacity not only for the research chairs themselves, but also for the institutions where they are located (NRF, 2019).
- ➔ They can help to align **research agendas** with African priorities, by bridging the gap between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. Research Chairs can create opportunities for researchers to engage with policy-makers, educators and community leaders, thereby enhancing the relevance of research outcomes. Existing Research Chair programmes show evidence of generating research outputs that are relevant and used by decision-makers (NRF, 2019; UNESCO, 2022).

 See also [Intervention 1](#) for more on establishing African-led education research agendas.




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A strong field for education research in Africa

Based on extensive input from African education researchers and policy makers, these five factors are critical to building a strong field for education research:

- ➔ A robust **knowledge base**, aligned with local African priorities.
- ➔ Sustainable **resources** to enable African-led research and dissemination.
- ➔ A dynamic research **agenda** that reflects African education research priorities.
- ➔ A vibrant research **culture** that champions collaboration, gender equity and social inclusion.
- ➔ Reliable **infrastructure** to support knowledge repositories, exchange and communication.

Acknowledgement: The consultation process above made use of Bridgespan's [Strong Field Framework](#).

- ➔ Research Chairs can contribute to increasing **resources** for education research, by forging partnerships with industry, government and international bodies.
 -  For more on education research funding, also consider [Intervention 2](#).
- ➔ These positions are geared to enhance the **research culture** within and amongst academic institutions, by improving access for under-represented categories of researchers, promoting equity and inclusion, and facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration and partnerships.
 -  For more on enhancing partnerships and collaboration, see [Intervention 6](#).
- ➔ Research Chairs can be tasked to support appropriate **infrastructure** for education research, by managing engagement with research grant programmes, African knowledge repositories and dissemination platforms.
 -  Read more about strengthening administrative capacity for education research under [Intervention 4](#) and communications platforms in [Interventions 8](#).

For more background information on why this intervention is crucial, read the [situational analysis](#) undertaken as part of this project, and/or explore how this intervention responds to the [strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats](#) identified by African education research stakeholders.

Aims and objectives of the intervention

The broad aims of this intervention are:

- ➔ To promote and support education research in Africa, not only for individuals' academic career development, but to have a meaningful impact on local education policies and practices.
- ➔ To foster connection and synergy between researchers, decision-makers, practitioners and other stakeholders of the education system.
- ➔ To promote inclusion, gender equity and capacity building, especially amongst the next generation of education researchers and South-South peer learning networks.

In order to pursue these broad aims, the specific objectives of the intervention are:

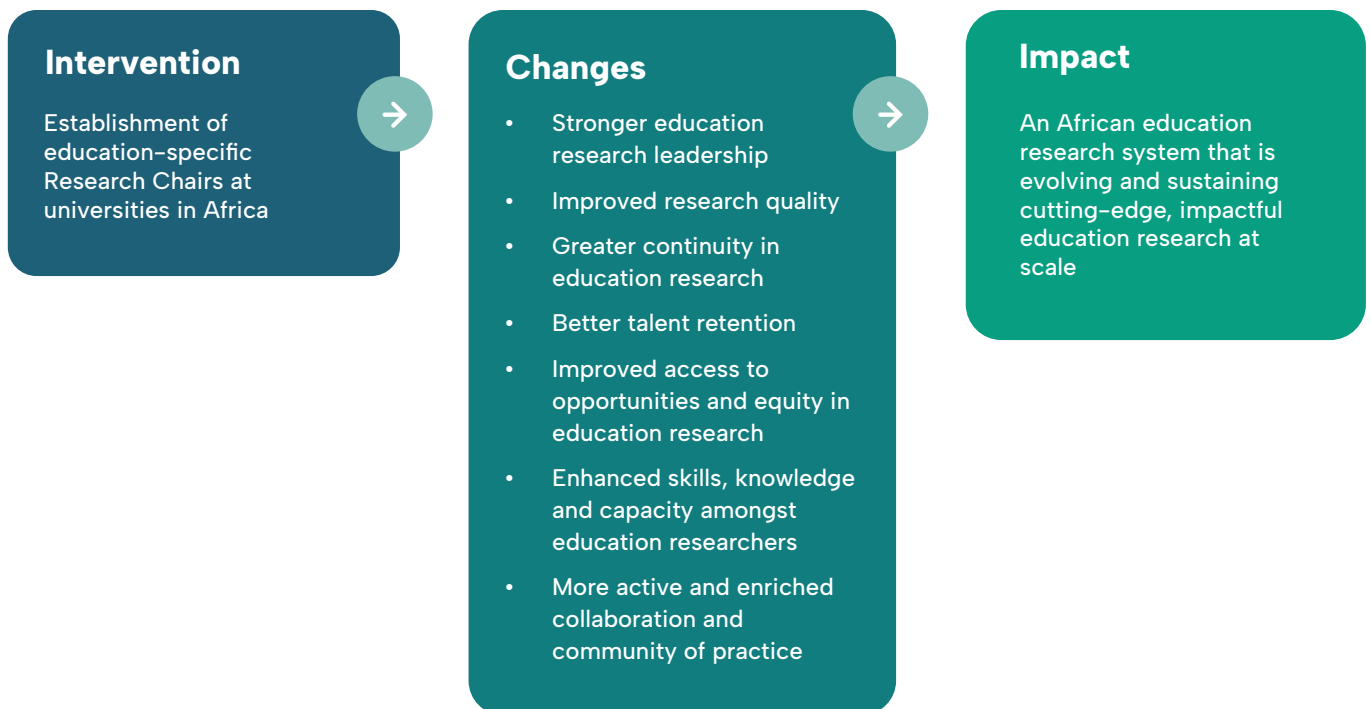
- ➔ To establish education-specific Research Chairs at up to five institutions in each participating African country.
- ➔ To put measures in place to ensure the continuity and sustainability of Research Chairs in education, so as to build a strong research culture and long-term commitment to research quality.
- ➔ To define and develop the role of Research Chairs to provide research leadership and mentorship, to connect education stakeholders and convene strategic conversations, coordinate support for early career researchers, and promote multi-disciplinary collaboration.
- ➔ To create opportunities for network-building and exchange amongst African education researchers by linking Research Chairs to one another and to institutions, in and outside of Africa, including with African diaspora researchers.
- ➔ To deliberately advance gender equity and social inclusion (GESI) through the selection of Research Chairs and their surrounding teams, as well as promoting GESI through the design of Research Chair activities like mentorship and capacity-building.

Expected outcomes

The expected outcomes of this intervention are as follows¹:

- ➔ **Outcome 1: Promotion of research leadership, research culture and excellence at the institutional level.** Existing interventions demonstrate that Research Chair programmes attract seasoned researchers. These researchers, in turn, mentor emerging researchers and play a role in equipping them to eventually pass on their skills.
- ➔ **Outcome 2: Strengthened continuity and sustainability of education research at the institutional level.** Literature on other initiatives of this kind show that Research Chair positions not only propel the careers of individual researchers, but that the host institutions benefit more broadly from greater research capacity and enhanced research quality.
- ➔ **Outcome 3: A network and community of practice is catalysed through connecting institutions to each other, to communities, national granting councils and policy makers.** Research Chairs have been found to facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration and partnerships, both within academia and with external stakeholders. They provide a platform for researchers to engage with research users, including policymakers, educators, and community leaders, ensuring that research outputs are relevant and usable. Networks and communities of practice have also developed and been enriched by these types of programmes.

These outcomes are seen to contribute to the following impact pathway:







The following section provides an overview of existing Research Chair initiatives relevant to this initiative.

¹ The sources referred to in this section are cited in full in the reference list at the end of the document. They include Small Globe, 2015; NRF, 2019; UNESCO, 2022.

Relevant examples of Research Chair initiatives

While there is no sizeable education-specific Research Chair initiative currently in Africa, the mechanism of Research Chairs has been employed successfully through a number of other programmes, including one focussing on economics. These examples are presented here as a foundation for learning from existing experience on the continent and encouraging synergies with other actors in the field wherever possible.

Programme	Detail
<p>South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI)</p> 	<p>SARChI at a glance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Established by the South African Department of Science and Technology and the National Research Foundation in 2006. → Since 2006, 275 Research Chairs have been awarded to 23 public universities. → Chairs focus on African scholars. → Candidates for Research Chairs are recruited externally (from other African universities and African diaspora abroad) as well as internally (from South African universities). → Priority research areas: science and technology for poverty alleviation, innovation, engineering and technology development.
<p>UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN</p> 	<p>UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme at a glance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Established in 1992. → There are currently 950 UNESCO Research Chairs and 45 UNITWIN Networks in 120 countries. → Research Chairs and networks can consist of global or international collaborations.. → Higher education institutions interested in hosting UNESCO Research Chairs nominate candidates from within their institutions. → Priority research areas: Education, sustainable development, natural and social sciences, culture and communication.
<p>The African Economic Research Consortium (AERC)</p> 	<p>AERC at a glance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Established in 1988. → AERC operates through a network of researchers and institutions across Sub-Saharan Africa, aiming to enhance research capacity within these institutions and their economic policy research. → AERC works with a collaborative network of researchers, universities and policy-makers. Research Chairs and participants are often drawn from these networks and are selected to contribute to policy-oriented research within the thematic, collaborative and technical workshops. The exact nomination process typically aligns with the organisation's broader goals of linking research and policy, generating research results, and promoting the retention of high-quality researchers. → Priority research areas: Building local capacity for policy-oriented research; generating research results for policy analysts and policymakers; promoting connections between research and policy, and encouraging the retention and development of high-quality researchers in Africa.

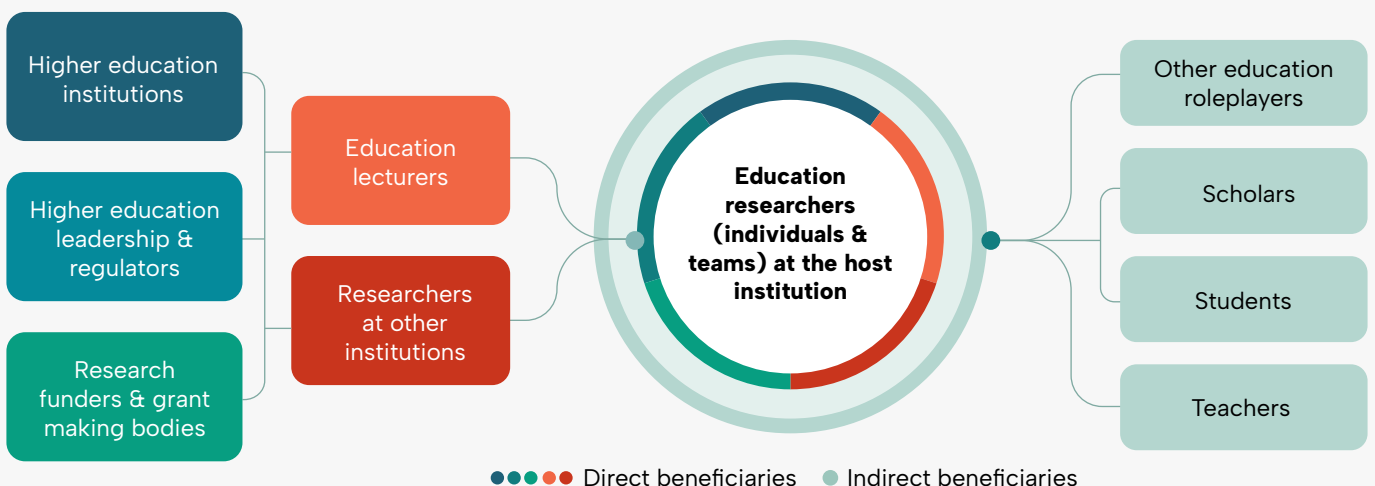
Programme	Detail
<p>O.R. Tambo Africa Research Chairs Initiative (ORTARChI)</p> 	<p>ORTARChI at a glance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Launched in 2019 by the South African National Research Foundation (NRF), in partnership with the Department of Science and Innovation and international funding bodies. → The initiative has awarded 10 Research Chairs across universities in nine African countries. → ORTARChI promotes intra-African and international collaborations to strengthen research capacity on the continent. → Chairs are appointed through an open, competitive selection process, focusing on scholars from African institutions. → Priority research areas: health, climate change, environmental sustainability, digital transformation, and governance.

Who will benefit most from this intervention?

Establishing Research Chair positions dedicated to education at African higher education institutions will benefit the following actors in the education eco-system:

- Education researchers (individuals and teams) in the host institution, who can undertake cutting-edge, impact-driven education research on a consistent basis.
- Other education researchers and researchers interested in education, at other universities in the same country, and in other countries, with whom they engage in discussion and knowledge exchange.
- Education faculty and lecturers at host universities, whose teaching can be enhanced by research being conducted by Research Chairs.
- Policymakers who have access to research outputs that can inform and guide decision-making and policy planning affecting education.
- Members of higher education governance structures, such as university senates and Vice Chancellors at the host institution, who are associated with quality research production and enhanced academic reputation.
- Funders, and national science granting councils or research funds, who have effective platforms to direct education research funding.
- Ultimately teachers, students and scholars, who experience the benefits of improved policies and education practice, informed by robust, implementation-oriented research.

The chart below depicts the direct and indirect beneficiaries of this intervention.



Designing this intervention: Important considerations

This section explores the design features to consider when initiating this intervention. It is informed by research on existing Research Chair programmes and consultations with African education researchers and policy-makers. Most existing Research Chair programmes are based in universities and rely on North/South collaborations, with South Africa playing a dominant role compared to other African countries. Contextual needs must be considered when initiating Research Chair programmes in other settings.

Geographical scope

The focus of the intervention is at country-level and is scalable across the region. More attention will have to be given on how exactly scaling can be achieved. For example, strengthening connections between host institutions could be pursued through peer learning, creating a network of regulators in and amongst those countries interested in advancing education research, and/or connecting funders with different regional interests.

Individual vs teams of research chairs

Research Chairs can consist of individual researchers or teams of researchers in one or many institutions. A review of the SARChI found that initially focus was given to developing and supporting individual Research Chairs. However, there was a strong call to shift towards developing centres of excellence around the Research Chairs to advance broader, country-level research agendas. These centres of excellence can be structured across multiple campuses to achieve a critical mass of researchers working in collaboration on related research areas (NRF, 2019). Research Chair initiatives can also span across countries, although these types of structures may face more coordination and administrative-related challenges. Despite these challenges, cross-country initiatives may create more opportunities for researchers to collaborate and access various resources. Another benefit is the opportunity this structure creates to advance continental research agendas.



See [Intervention 1](#) for further discussion on developing Africa-led education research agendas.

Please visit the EERA project page at bit.ly/30OssDV.

The idea of creating centres of excellence along with Research Chairs aligns with the recommendation from the African Education Research Funding Consortium to create 'strong and equitable systems, not islands of excellence', thereby supporting networks rather than single individuals or institutions (AERFC, 2023). The consortium also

recommends challenging prevailing notions of excellence and impact, given that the standard metrics typically set researchers up to stick to mainstream research agendas. Research Chairs should have flexibility to pursue research that is relevant and influential, even if it challenges the status quo.

Responsibilities beyond research

The roles and responsibilities given to Research Chairs over and above research must be tailored to the needs of each institution and the broader ecosystem. Research on existing programmes² reveal the following insights:

- ➔ Mentorship is an additional role that can help to foster a broader culture of research excellence and contribute to the professional development of emerging researchers. When mentorship remains voluntary in higher education settings, it is often constrained by challenges such as time limitations, mismatches in terms of areas of interests/expertise and lack of training in mentorship. For mentorship to be effective, it would therefore need to be part of the formal responsibility of a Research Chair. The AERFC has further suggested creating informal spaces for mentorship. These can be either in-person or through platforms such as WhatsApp.
- ➔ The UNESCO Research Chair programme uses an integrated approach, combining research, teaching, training and community engagement. This approach has contributed to the enrichment of existing higher education partnerships, networks, and knowledge generation across disciplines. Existing Research Chair programmes highlight the importance of establishing communities of practice to share knowledge. These can be cross-disciplinary and/or across multiple campuses, institutions or even regions. Again, it would be vital for teaching and training, as well as community engagement, to be formalised as part of a Research Chair's role, so as to ensure that research responsibilities do not compete with other duties.

² While the programmes referred to here do not focus on education research or Research Chair initiatives per se, the lessons learned from providing mentorship in higher education settings are transferrable. The sources are cited in full in the reference list, and include Aina & Naidoo, 2016; AERFC, 2023; Doherty, Gilson, & Shung-King, 2018; UNESCO, 2021; UNESCO 2022.

Gender, equity and social inclusion (GESI)

The design of this intervention should reflect GESI considerations. Women in research often experience the system differently to men. For example, women with children frequently have to balance childcare and familial duties with work demands (Nicolle, 2023). These experiences should be factored in when defining roles and responsibilities, as well as other conditions of employment.

The intervention will also require attention to gender balance across Research Chairs and their surrounding teams. Existing Research Chair programmes highlight the importance of reflecting GESI considerations in the recruitment and selection criteria. For example, although some change has started to take place, in South Africa, Research Chairs were predominantly occupied by white men (Breetzke & Hedding, 2020).

Institutional support and capacity

Successful Research Chair programmes are accompanied by supportive environments with a functioning university regulator or equivalent (Jowi, 2021). The implementation of this intervention is therefore dependent on simultaneously strengthening the administrative capacity of the institutions hosting Research Chairs.



See **Intervention 4** for a discussion of this vital component.

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Mechanisms for performance evaluation

Research Chairs are typically awarded for fixed terms, often renewable based on performance and strategic priorities. Appropriate mechanisms for evaluating performance need to be built into the programme.

Recruitment and selection

Existing Research Chair initiatives differ in their recruitment processes. Some initiatives invite applications from institutions, whereas others recruit. Rigorous selection criteria are employed to identify outstanding researchers who have demonstrated leadership in their fields and have the potential to make significant contributions through their work. Selection processes should reflect local and sector needs. Consideration should be given to how best to attract black women for Research Chair positions. The recruitment and selection processes will also have to consider whether to attract in-country researchers or recruit members of the diaspora back into the country, as was the case in Kenya with the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (Jowi, 2021). Another possibility is to include lay researchers, or NGO/CSO leaders (provided they meet the academic requirements to be a university lecturer/professor) as Research Chairs. However, it would be advisable for such an individual to have a relationship with a university in order to mentor students. Another consideration could be to seek equivalencies. For example, in Kenya, Kisii University has made provision for research professors.

Next Steps

If you would like to fund an education-specific Research Chair initiative, the following steps will help you to start planning the process:

- 1. Identify geographic scope and scale:** Consider whether this intervention would span across a region or be located within one country. The best-case scenario would be to implement Research Chairs within offices that have strong business development capacity to attract funding, and alongside **Intervention 4**, which focuses on strengthening administrative capacity. within the country/ region where the Research Chairs intervention will be implemented in. This would include mapping the key education research actors and institutions, identifying potential funding mechanisms, and existing networks and relationships between higher education institutions. This study would assess the strength of the education research field with a particular view to establishing Research Chairs.
- 2. Situational analysis:** Conduct a situation analysis

3. **Develop criteria for inclusion of universities:** Some considerations may include whether this intervention should be based in elite education institutions or whether a mix of high and lower achieving universities would be preferred. Many funders have pre-existing relationships with universities, funders can leverage this established trust and work together with these universities (should they meet the criteria for inclusion). Importantly, mechanisms for managing potential bias should be put in place. Particular emphasis should be placed on assessing universities' policy frameworks to identify universities with supportive, enabling policy environments.
4. **Co-design:** Facilitate a consultative design process to develop the Research Chair initiative, working with key actors identified through the situation analysis. This process should include:
 - a. Develop recruitment and selection criteria for Research Chairs, specifically focusing on GESI considerations.
 - b. Design mechanisms for performance evaluation.
 - c. Designing a set of shared values and principles, such as collaboration and inclusion, to inform the initiative.
 - d. Place particular emphasis on working through potential risks. For example, the design process should identify and articulate how researchers within target universities are incentivised to generate policy-relevant research. Another focus area would be to identify if researchers are protected from heavy teaching and administrative loads.
 - e. Finally, the co-design process should include designing a sustainability plan.


What would it look like to start this Intervention off in Kenya?

- A mapping study conducted by ESSA (2024) identified leading institutions contributing to education research, including the University of Nairobi, The African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC), Moi University, Kenyatta University, Maseno University, Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, and the University of Embu. These stakeholders could be engaged during the situational analysis as well as during the co-design phase.
- Engage the Commission for University of Education (CUE) in Kenya and the African Research Universities Alliance to assess their capacity to implement a Research Chairs programme.
- Understand how such a programme would fit with existing national KPIs set by CUE and the Ministry and funding mechanisms for universities, including the National Research Foundation, to ensure that incentives align behind research excellence and community building.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1: SWOT Analysis and Research Chairs

The table below depicts how the Research Chairs Initiative is expected to address the SWOT analysis undertaken by education research stakeholders as part of the EERA process.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Leadership in research areas: Research chairs can provide strong leadership, guiding research priorities and fostering innovation in key areas. → Talent attraction and retention: The presence of research chairs helps attract top-tier researchers and ensures that skilled individuals stay within the institution. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Limited funding for sustainable positions: Funding for research chairs is often short-term or inconsistent, making it difficult to establish and sustain these roles. → Lack of strategic planning: Without a clear strategy, institutions may struggle to align research chair positions with broader research goals and capacity-building efforts.
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Enhancing research capacity: Research chairs provide a platform for building capacity in emerging fields, enabling the institution to develop expertise in strategic areas. → Collaborative opportunities: Establishing research chairs can lead to partnerships with industry, government, and international bodies, opening new channels for research funding and collaboration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Competition for high-calibre researchers: Growing competition among institutions to secure leading researchers and establish chairs in emerging research areas. → Dependence on external funding: Relying on external grants for the funding of research chairs can pose a threat to sustainability and long-term strategic planning.



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