

The Strategic Role of Character Education In Forming The Legal Culture of Law Students As Prospective Law Enforcement Officers

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Abstract.

Character education in the formation of legal culture plays a strategic role in shaping law students as prospective law enforcers who are not only academically competent but also possess moral integrity, social responsibility, and sensitivity to justice. This study highlights the urgency of character education to instill honesty, responsibility, discipline, empathy, and moral courage, as well as the importance of a healthy legal culture so that students understand the law as a means of protecting society. The research method used is normative juridical with a conceptual and literature approach. The results of the study indicate that character education integrated with legal learning, legal clinics, moot courts, ethical reflection, and community service can shape prospective law enforcers who are ethical, intelligent, and responsible.

Keywords: *Character education, legal culture, law students, law enforcement and professional ethics.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Legal education occupies a strategic position in the development of the national legal system because law universities serve as a platform for the formation of prospective law graduates and future legal professionals. Through legal education, students are prepared to enter various professional fields, such as advocates, prosecutors, judges, notaries, legal consultants, academics, state officials, and other professions related to legal services and justice. Therefore, legal education cannot be limited to mastering theories, norms, principles, and regulations, but must also be directed at developing students' attitudes, personality, moral responsibility, and social sensitivity. Ideally, legal higher education should produce graduates who are not only intellectually intelligent but also possess strong ethics, character, legal awareness, and a strong legal culture to fulfill their social roles in society (Utami, 2020; Triwahyuningsih, 2025).

Normatively, the importance of character education in the national education system can be seen from Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System. Article 3 of the law emphasizes that national education functions to develop abilities and shape the character and civilization of a dignified nation. The goal of national education is not only directed at increasing knowledge, but also at developing individuals who are faithful, pious, have noble morals, are independent, democratic, and responsible. In the context of legal education, this provision serves as an important basis for developing law students as individuals with both academic intelligence and moral maturity, as they will later be directly involved in the interests of society, the protection of citizens' rights, and the process of upholding justice (Law Number 20 of 2003; Constitutional Court of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022).

Strengthening character education in higher education also has a legal basis through Law Number 12 of 2012 concerning Higher Education. This law emphasizes that higher education aims to develop students' potential to become individuals who are faithful and devoted to God Almighty, have noble character, are healthy, knowledgeable, capable, creative, independent, skilled, competent, and cultured for the benefit of the nation. This provision demonstrates that higher education institutions, including law faculties, have a responsibility to produce graduates not only capable of theoretically understanding the law but also possessing the ability to practice humanitarian values, ethics, and social responsibility. Therefore, character education in higher legal education must be viewed as an essential part of the academic process, not merely a supplement to the curriculum or formal institutional activities (Law Number 12 of 2012; Setiawan, 2023).

Within the national legal framework, the character development of law students is inextricably linked to the values of Pancasila, the foundation of the state and the source of values in Indonesian legal life. Pancasila embodies the values of divinity, humanity, unity, democracy, and social justice, which should serve as the moral foundation for the formation of law and the behavior of legal practitioners. Law students need to understand that law is not merely a collection of normative texts but also a moral instrument that must be implemented with consideration for the values of justice, humanity, and the interests of the wider community. If law is understood only formally without appreciating the values of Pancasila, legal practice risks becoming rigid, procedural, and alienating society's sense of justice (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022; Gafur, 2024).

Legal issues in Indonesia demonstrate that law enforcement challenges are not always caused by a lack of regulation. Indonesia has numerous laws, law enforcement agencies, and case resolution mechanisms. However, in practice, various problems persist, such as low public trust in law enforcement officials, corruption, abuse of authority, discrimination in the legal process, poor access to justice for the poor, and ethical violations by legal professionals. These conditions demonstrate that legal issues are not only related to legal substance and institutional structure, but also closely related to legal culture, morality, and the character of those who enforce the law (Bappenas, 2024; Triwahyuningsih, 2025).

Character issues are also evident within the legal education environment itself. In academic practice, behaviors that do not reflect the character of prospective law enforcement officers can still be found, such as plagiarism, cheating on exams, asking students to sign in for their absence, misuse of technology to copy others' work, low discipline, weak responsibility in completing assignments, and a lack of concern for social issues. Although these behaviors occur within the campus environment, their impact cannot be underestimated, as they can be an early sign of a weak legal culture among students. If law students are accustomed to ignoring honesty, responsibility, and discipline from their early years, it is feared that these habits will carry over when they enter the legal profession (Setiawan, 2023; Arianty, 2026).

Besides the issue of academic behavior, another challenge in legal education is the tendency for learning to overemphasize cognitive aspects. Students are often directed to memorize articles, theories, doctrines, and decisions, but are not always given sufficient space to develop ethical sensitivity, reflective skills, and a commitment to substantive justice. Legal learning that focuses solely on the question of "what rules apply" can leave students less accustomed to questioning whether the application of those rules is fair, who is harmed, how they impact society, and how the law can protect vulnerable groups. As a result, legal education has the potential to produce graduates who are strong normatively but weak in understanding the moral, social, and humanitarian dimensions of law (Utami, 2020; Gafur, 2024).

Legal culture is a crucial aspect that needs to be strengthened in higher legal education because law operates not only through written regulations but also through attitudes, values, habits, and human perspectives on the law. A healthy legal culture will encourage students to respect the rules, uphold justice, respect the rights of others, reject deviations, and understand the law as a means of protecting society. Within the campus environment, legal culture can be built through the habit of obeying regulations, academic honesty, respect for differences of opinion, objectivity in assessment, and the example of lecturers. Therefore, legal culture cannot be taught simply through lectures but must be formed through experience, habituation, and a consistent academic environment (Triwahyuningsih, 2025; Arianty, 2026).

Character education in legal education is closely linked to the ethics of the legal profession. The legal profession is a profession that carries significant responsibility because it relates to a person's rights, freedom, honor, property, and even their future. An advocate, prosecutor, judge, police officer, notary, or legal official is required not only to possess legal knowledge but also the moral ability to distinguish between right and wrong, just and unjust, and proper and improper

actions. Therefore, character education must be directed at developing the values of honesty, responsibility, objectivity, empathy, discipline, moral courage, and a commitment to justice so that law students are prepared to enter the professional world ethically and responsibly (Gafur, 2024; Triwahyuningsih, 2025).

The development of digital technology also brings new challenges to the character development of law students. On the one hand, technology makes it easier for students to access regulations, journals, court decisions, and other legal information. However, on the other hand, digital developments also give rise to problems such as plagiarism, the spread of misinformation about the law, hate speech, privacy violations, cybercrime, misuse of personal data, and unethical use of artificial intelligence. Therefore, law students need to be equipped with digital legal literacy and digital ethics to be able to use technology responsibly, respect copyright, maintain data confidentiality, and avoid disseminating information that could mislead the public (Arianty, 2026; Setiawan, 2023).

Based on this description, character education and legal culture are urgent needs in higher legal education. Law students need to be shaped into future law enforcers who not only understand legal norms but also possess a conscience, social responsibility, moral courage, and a commitment to justice. Character-oriented legal education will help students understand that law is not merely a formal instrument, but rather a means to protect humans and build an orderly, just, and dignified society. Therefore, this article discusses the importance of character education and legal culture as an effort to shape the character of law students as future law enforcers, emphasizing the urgency of character education, the internalization of legal culture, the relationship between character and professional ethics, the role of higher education, learning strategies, and the challenges of its implementation (Bappenas, 2024; Arianty, 2026).

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a normative juridical method, a legal research that focuses on norms, principles, doctrines, concepts, and literature relevant to the issues of character education and legal culture. This method was used because the focus of the research is not on field data collection, but rather on conceptual analysis of how legal education can shape the character of students as future law enforcers. Normative legal research is appropriate for examining law as a system of norms related to legal values, principles, and doctrines (Muhaimin, 2020).

The approaches used are conceptual and literature. The conceptual approach is used to understand the concepts of character education, legal culture, legal professional ethics, legal awareness, and the moral responsibility of law students. Meanwhile, the literature approach is conducted by reviewing books, journal articles, academic documents, and laws and regulations related to higher legal education. Through this approach, the research can connect the concept of character education with the need to develop a legal culture within the university environment (Benuf & Azhar, 2020).

The legal sources in this study consist of primary, secondary, and tertiary legal materials. Primary legal materials include laws and regulations, specifically Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System and Law Number 12 of 2012 concerning Higher Education. Secondary legal materials include books, journals, research results, and academic documents on character education, legal culture, and legal education. Tertiary legal materials include dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other supporting sources. All legal materials were collected through literature review and analyzed descriptively and qualitatively to explain the relationship between character education, legal culture, and the formation of law students as future law enforcers (Suteki & Taufani, 2020).

III. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Urgency of Character Education for Law Students as Prospective Law Enforcers

Character education for law students is crucial because they are the future key actors in the legal system. They can become advocates, prosecutors, judges, police officers, notaries, legal consultants, legal officers, academics, policymakers, and even state officials. All of these professions are directly related to the public interest and the upholding of justice. Therefore, law students need not simply be equipped with the ability to read laws, understand legal principles, or develop legal arguments. They must also be equipped with strong character to apply their legal knowledge correctly, honestly, and responsibly.

The urgency of character education is increasingly apparent as law enforcement practices in Indonesia continue to face numerous real challenges. The public frequently complains that legal processes are slow, expensive, discriminatory, and do not always promote substantive justice. In some cases, the law is even perceived as being harsh on those below but blunt on those above. This phenomenon demonstrates that legal issues cannot be resolved simply by enacting new regulations or establishing new institutions. It also requires the development of legal professionals with moral character, ethical courage, and an awareness that the law must be used to protect society, not to further the interests of individuals or groups.

Law students need to understand that legal knowledge can be a powerful tool, but it can also be misused if not accompanied by morality. Someone who understands legal loopholes, procedures, and argumentative techniques can use their knowledge to fight for justice. However, the same knowledge can also be used to manipulate cases, justify unethical actions, or protect interests that conflict with a sense of justice. Therefore, character education serves as a moral bulwark to prevent legal intelligence from becoming a tool of deviation.

The first important value to instill is honesty. In an academic environment, honesty can be cultivated through prohibitions on plagiarism, honesty in examinations, authenticity of written work, and openness in the academic process. Academic honesty is the foundation of professional honesty. If law students habitually engage in plagiarism, falsifying data, or engaging in academic dishonesty, these behaviors can form harmful habits when they enter the legal profession. Dishonest law enforcement officers can undermine public trust in the law.

The second value is responsibility. Law students must be accustomed to understanding that every legal opinion, case analysis, and legal action has consequences for others. In the practice of the legal profession, errors in legal opinion can harm clients, the public, or the state. Therefore, from their college years, students need to be trained to be responsible for the arguments they construct, the legal sources they use, and the conclusions they reach. This responsibility also includes the ability to admit mistakes and openly correct them.

The third value is discipline towards norms and procedures. The law operates through procedures that must be respected. Law students need to understand that procedures are not merely formalities, but part of protecting rights. For example, in criminal law, examination procedures aim to protect the rights of suspects and prevent arbitrary action. In civil law, evidentiary procedures aim to ensure justice for all parties. Therefore, student discipline in following academic regulations, campus rules, and learning mechanisms is an initial practice in respecting legal procedures.

The fourth value is empathy for justice. Law students need to be sensitive to vulnerable groups in society, such as the poor, women, children, people with disabilities, victims of violence, laborers, farmers, indigenous peoples, and other groups who often experience difficulties in accessing justice. Without empathy, the law will be understood only as a dry normative text. With empathy, law students can see that behind every case are people, suffering, interests, and hopes for justice.

The fifth value is moral courage. Prospective law enforcement officers must have the courage to say right as right and wrong as wrong, even when facing pressure from power, money, position, social connections, or political interests. Moral courage is crucial because the legal profession often finds itself in difficult situations. Law enforcement officers may face pressure to change legal

opinions, ignore evidence, delay cases, or defend morally challenged parties. In such situations, character determines whether a person remains true to the truth or succumbs to self-interest.

2. Legal Culture as the Foundation for the Formation of Law Students

Legal culture is a crucial element in the legal system because law exists not only in regulations but also in human attitudes and behavior toward the law. Legal culture reflects how a person understands, respects, obeys, and uses the law in everyday life. In higher legal education, legal culture needs to be instilled from the outset so that students understand the law not only as a collection of articles but also as a system of values that must be implemented responsibly.

The legal culture of law students can be seen in their behavior within the academic environment. For example, adherence to regulations, honesty in completing assignments, respect for differing opinions, discipline in attending lectures, the ability to engage in ethical discussion, and a willingness to accept criticism are all part of legal culture. If law students fail to respect the small rules of campus life, it is difficult to expect them to respect the larger rules of professional life.

The formation of a legal culture cannot be achieved instantly. It is formed through a continuous process of habituation. Law universities need to create an academic environment that maintains consistency between the values taught and the practices carried out. If a university teaches honesty, it must also be firm against plagiarism. If a university teaches fairness, then the academic assessment process must also be objective. If a university teaches respect for rights, then the relationships between faculty, students, and educational staff must also reflect respect for human dignity.

Legal culture also relates to how students understand the function of law. Law students need to be accustomed to viewing law not merely as a tool for punishment, but also as a means of protection, conflict resolution, rights restoration, and the establishment of social order. With this understanding, law students will be better able to view law from a humanistic perspective, rather than merely a legalistic one.

In legal education, the internalization of legal culture can be achieved through an approach that combines cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. The cognitive aspect relates to students' understanding of legal norms, principles, theories, and systems. The affective aspect relates to students' attitudes toward the values of justice, truth, humanity, and compliance with the law. Meanwhile, the behavioral aspect relates to students' actual habits in practicing legal values. These three aspects must work together so that legal education not only produces knowledge but also shapes legal personality.

3. The Relationship between Character Education and Legal Professional Ethics

Character education is closely linked to legal professional ethics because character serves as the moral foundation that underpins professional behavior, while professional ethics provides concrete guidelines for how a legal professional exercises their authority and responsibilities. Professional ethics cannot simply be understood as formal rules; moral values such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, and moral courage must be instilled in students from the beginning of their legal education (Utami, 2020). Character education helps students develop an awareness that legal knowledge must be used for the purposes of justice, not simply to win cases or advance specific interests.

Legal professionals have a unique responsibility because their decisions can impact the rights, freedoms, honor, and well-being of society. Judges determine a person's fate through their decisions, prosecutors influence the prosecution process, advocates help people obtain justice, and notaries ensure certainty in civil law (Rahmawati, 2022). Because the impact of legal decisions is so significant, every legal profession demands high ethical standards that can only be upheld by individuals with strong character. Character education equips students with the ability to assess whether a legal action is not only legal but also just and morally appropriate.

Character education helps students understand the dilemmas that often arise in legal practice, where actions that are legitimate according to formal rules do not necessarily reflect substantive justice. Students are trained to think critically and reflectively: asking not only "is this legal?" but also "is this fair?", "is this beneficial to society?", and "am I being socially responsible?" (Sari, 2022). This ability is essential to anticipate manipulative legal practices, abuse of authority, or decisions that ignore citizens' rights, which frequently occur in Indonesia.

Legal professional ethics must also be taught contextually and integrated into all law courses. In criminal law, students learn the presumption of innocence, the right to legal aid, and victim protection; in civil law, they learn the principles of good faith, contractual justice, and protection of the vulnerable; in constitutional law, they understand the limitations of power, constitutional supremacy, and the protection of citizens' rights (Triwahyuni, 2021). With this approach, ethics becomes the soul of legal learning, not just an additional subject, thus producing graduates with integrity, objectivity, and awareness of their professional responsibilities.

Furthermore, character education and professional ethics work together to build a healthy and sustainable legal professional culture. Activities such as moot courts, legal clinics, legal debates, research, and community service enable students to practice moral values in real-world contexts. Integrating the two ensures that graduates are not only intellectually intelligent but also possess integrity, moral courage, empathy for justice, and a commitment to the public interest. Without character education, professional ethics is merely a formality; without professional ethics, good character lacks operational guidance in legal practice. Therefore, character education and professional ethics must be developed simultaneously to shape future law enforcement officers who are professional, fair, and dignified.

4. The Role of Higher Education and Learning Strategies in Shaping the Character of Law Students

Higher education institutions play a crucial role in shaping the character of law students as future law enforcers who are professional, virtuous, and responsible. The function of higher education institutions extends beyond providing education and transferring knowledge to encompass the development of students' personalities, morality, and academic culture. In the context of legal education, character building is crucial because law school graduates will face issues of justice, human rights, power, and various social conflicts that require moral and ethical considerations. Therefore, higher education institutions must be able to create an academic environment that supports the sustainable development of student character through various educational policies and activities (Triwahyuningsih, 2025).

One effort that can be made is through strengthening the legal education curriculum to incorporate integrated character values. Courses such as Pancasila Education, Civics Education, Legal Philosophy, Legal Professional Ethics, Legal Sociology, Law and Human Rights, and the Legal Clinic can be strategic tools for instilling the values of honesty, responsibility, discipline, social awareness, and a commitment to justice. However, character education should not be confined to specific courses. All law courses should integrate moral and ethical values into the learning process so that students understand law not only as a set of rules but also as an instrument for realizing justice and benefiting society (Utami, 2020; Gafur, 2024).

In addition to the curriculum, character development for law students also requires active, reflective, and contextual learning strategies. Learning methods that focus solely on memorizing legal articles and theories need to be transformed into ones that encourage students to think critically and connect the law to social reality. Case-based learning can be used to train students to analyze legal issues comprehensively, consider aspects of justice, and understand the social impact of implementing legal regulations. With this method, students not only learn what the law regulates but also understand why the law is necessary and how it can provide solutions to societal problems (Arianty, 2026).

Other effective learning strategies for shaping the character of law students include legal clinics, moot courts, ethical reflection, and community service activities. Legal clinics provide

students with the opportunity to interact directly with the public and understand the legal issues faced by justice seekers. Moot courts train students in legal procedures, argumentation techniques, and professional ethics in trial practice. Ethical reflection through case discussions, decision analysis, and reflective journal writing can help students understand the moral dilemmas that frequently arise in legal practice. Meanwhile, community service activities foster empathy, social awareness, and an awareness that legal knowledge must be used to benefit the wider community, especially vulnerable groups in need of legal protection (Gafur, 2024; Triwahyuningsih, 2025).

The success of character education in higher education is also greatly influenced by the exemplary behavior of lecturers and the academic culture fostered by the institution. Lecturers serve not only as transmitters of material but also as role models of integrity, discipline, objectivity, and professional responsibility. Furthermore, universities need to implement strict policies against various ethical violations such as plagiarism, grade manipulation, academic dishonesty, discrimination, and abuse of authority. An academic environment that upholds honesty and fairness will help students understand that law is not only studied as theory but must also be implemented in everyday behavior. Thus, the synergy between the curriculum, learning strategies, lecturer role models, and a healthy academic culture can produce law graduates who are not only intellectually superior but also possess strong character, ethics, and a strong legal culture as a foundation for their future profession (Utami, 2020; Arianty, 2026).

5. The Challenges of Character Education and Legal Culture

The implementation of character education and legal culture in higher education faces various complex challenges. The first challenge is the continued dominance of learning patterns oriented toward memorization and cognitive mastery of material. Law students are often assessed solely on their ability to memorize articles, cite legal theories, or explain legal procedures, while critical thinking, ethical judgment, and social responsibility are not yet primary assessment indicators. This learning model risks producing graduates who are academically intelligent but morally immature, leaving them ill-prepared to face ethical dilemmas in the legal profession (Sari, 2022).

The second challenge relates to the perception that character education is the responsibility of only specific courses. In fact, character development should be the responsibility of the entire academic environment, including lecturers, educational staff, student organizations, and campus policies. Character education delivered through only one or two courses will struggle to have a significant impact, as student character is formed through daily interactions and experiences in the academic environment. Therefore, all elements of higher education need to be actively involved in instilling moral values, ethics, and legal culture comprehensively (Triwahyuni, 2021).

The third challenge is the gap between the ideal values taught on campus and the reality of legal practice in society. Students often encounter corrupt, discriminatory, slow, or unfair legal practices, which can foster cynicism and pessimism toward the legal profession. In such circumstances, universities need to instill a critical optimism, the ability to realistically view legal issues without losing their commitment to improving the situation. Students need to be taught that while legal practice is not always perfect, integrity, moral courage, and adherence to legal principles remain the primary responsibilities of prospective law enforcement officers (Putra, 2023).

The fourth challenge arises from the rapid development of digital technology. Law students now have extensive access to legal information via the internet, but they also face the risks of digital plagiarism, misuse of artificial intelligence, the spread of false information, and privacy violations. Character education must be extended to the digital realm so that law students are able to use technology ethically, respect copyright, safeguard personal data, and be responsible in conveying legal information. Digital legal literacy is an integral part of modern character formation, ensuring graduates maintain professional and moral values while facing technological challenges (Arianto, 2023).

The final challenge relates to the inconsistency between character education on campus and the prevailing legal culture in society. Students need to be guided to understand that character values

don't stop in the classroom but must be applied in real-world practice, both in legal simulations and community service experiences. Universities need to develop learning strategies that combine theory, practical experience, and ethical reflection so that students can directly see, feel, and internalize legal values. Thus, while this challenge is complex, integrating character education, legal culture, and real-world experience is key to producing competent, ethical, and highly integrated law enforcement candidates.

6. An Ideal Model of Character Education and Legal Culture for Law Students

The ideal model for character education and legal culture for law students is one that balances mastery of legal knowledge, moral value formation, and practical experience. Law students need not only to understand laws and regulations, legal principles, and legal theory; they also need to possess ethical awareness in applying that knowledge. With this model, legal education is not only aimed at producing graduates capable of answering exam questions or constructing legal arguments, but also at developing individuals who are honest, responsible, critical, and concerned with justice, and who are able to position the law as a means of protecting society.

A character-based legal education model needs to be realized through a curriculum that emphasizes not only cognitive aspects but also affective and behavioral ones. Positive law courses remain an important foundation in legal education, but they must be enriched with studies in legal philosophy, professional ethics, legal sociology, legal psychology, human rights, legal communication, legal technology, and anti-corruption education. This interdisciplinary approach is crucial because legal issues in society never exist in isolation. Every legal issue is typically related to social, economic, political, cultural, and humanitarian conditions, so law students need to be accustomed to viewing legal issues holistically.

In addition to the curriculum, the ideal model for character education and legal culture must also be supported by active, reflective, and applicable learning methods. Case-based learning, group discussions, mock trials, legal clinics, legal debates, legal opinion writing, and community service can provide students with the tools to train them to face real-life legal issues. Through these activities, students not only learn to understand legal norms but also learn to make decisions, respect procedures, listen to the interests of others, and consider the value of justice in every problem-solving process.

This ideal model also requires an academic culture consistent with legal values. Law schools must foster an academic environment that upholds honesty, discipline, responsibility, openness, and respect for differing opinions. Prohibition of plagiarism, objectivity in assessment, exemplary lecturers, adherence to academic regulations, and respect for ethical discussions are all part of the process of fostering a legal culture on campus. Students will more easily understand legal values if these values are truly practiced in their daily academic lives.

Thus, character education and legal culture must be placed at the forefront of higher legal education. Developing law enforcement officers with character is not only an academic necessity, but also a national necessity in building a just and trusted legal system. A sound legal system is not only supported by comprehensive regulations and strong institutions; it also requires legal professionals who are moral, courageous, fair, objective, and responsible. Therefore, the ideal model of legal education must be able to produce graduates who are not only intellectually intelligent but also morally mature and prepared to practice the legal profession with dignity.

IV. CONCLUSION

Character education and legal culture are crucial for law students, enabling them to apply legal knowledge ethically, fairly, and responsibly. Values such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, empathy, and moral courage are the primary foundation for developing law enforcement candidates with integrity. Legal culture also needs to be internalized from the beginning of their education, ensuring that students understand that law is not merely a normative text or a collection of written rules, but rather a value system that serves to protect society, maintain order, and achieve justice.

Law schools play a strategic role in shaping students' character and legal culture through their curriculum, teaching methods, exemplary lecturers, academic policies, and community service activities. Effective learning strategies include case-based learning, legal clinics, mock trials, ethical reflection, and community service. By consistently implementing character-based legal education, law students are expected to possess not only intellectual abilities but also moral maturity and social sensitivity sufficient to face the challenges of the modern legal profession.

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