

Graduate School

**Supervising PhDs and
other research degree
programmes:
Good Practice Guide**

April 2013

Introduction

Supervising doctoral students is one of the most satisfying things that anyone in Higher Education can do. Helping a new scholar to become an independent researcher is a significant achievement.

The majority of supervision experiences are very positive. Many students and supervisors stay in contact for the rest of their academic careers; some even become life-long friends.

However, we are not all born with an innate ability to provide high quality supervision the first time we take on a student. Most of us need some guidance. In Reading, we have a system whereby staff who have not supervised previously act as co-supervisors (alongside a more experienced supervisor) until they have supervised a student successfully to completion.

The purpose of this Good Practice Guide is to supplement this hands-on experience. Those of you who are new to supervision should also attend one of the training sessions organised by CSTD and the Graduate School before you take on your first student. Those of you who are more experienced may find it useful to attend one or more of our update sessions.

This guide is primarily aimed at PhD supervision, but much of it will also be useful for other research programmes, such as MPhils and the research element of Professional Doctorates.

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Student Selection

In order to have a lively and vibrant postgraduate research community it is essential to recruit and select high quality students who have the aptitude to complete a strong PhD in the required time period.

The University Code of Practice (Section 2) requires that:

- (e) Applicants should normally possess at least a first degree (normally of an Upper Second Class honours standard or above), although some discipline areas require a Masters level degree.
- (f) Applicants resident in the UK should normally be asked to attend for an interview.
- (g) In making a decision on an applicant, Schools should consider not only the academic and research ability of the candidate, but also the feasibility of the research project proposal in terms of:
 - the academic standard of the research proposed;
 - the clarity of the aims and objectives;
 - any equipment/special facilities that may be required, and any associated additional cost;
 - the availability of appropriate supervisory expertise and experience;
 - the length of time that the research may take (in the light of the minimum and maximum lengths of registration).
- (h) For candidates whose first language is not English, the normal entry requirement is a score of 7.0 on the IELTS Test, although some Schools and Departments may accept a score of 6.5.
- (i) All processes for student selection should be conducted in a fair and transparent way, in line with the University's Equality & Diversity Policy.

Suggestions

- It is important that more than one member of staff is involved in selection interviews.
- When interviewing, ask questions to probe for specific examples of appropriate attributes like these:
 - Ability to grasp concepts and reason analytically
 - Motivation and perseverance in achieving objectives
 - Capacity for independent thought
 - Organisational skills
 - Independence as a learner
 - Self-confidence
 - Enthusiasm/passion for topic
 - Nature and extent of any relevant previous experience
 - Likelihood of establishing good working relationships
- For students who cannot attend an interview, other methods include:
 - Using video conference facilities or Skype to interview
 - Talking on the telephone to check English language ability
 - Setting up an email exchange with the applicant

- Asking for a critical written comment on a relevant journal article
- Seeing if it is possible to meet up with them at a conference
- Asking for a sample of their written work

Further information on conducting interviews for applications for research programmes can be found in our Good Practice Guide on Interviewing Students for Research Degree Programmes¹

Induction

The first few days and weeks of a PhD programme can have a lasting effect on students' perceptions of their overall 'PhD experience'. It is essential therefore that students undergo a very positive 'induction process'.

Within the University, induction is carried at both a central and local level. It is important for students to take part in both types of event. You (and others in your School) should ensure that there are no significant Department / School events for new PGR students that clash with the timing of the University induction / Welcome events (run by the Graduate School and held near the start of each term), and you should check that your students will be attending the these.

At a local level, the University Code of Practice (Section 3) requires that Schools should organise an induction for their new students at the start of the Autumn Term, other individual induction arrangements will be needed for students starting at different times of year and for some part-time and 'working-away' students. The following items should be covered:

- Facilities and resources available to research students;
- Student Welfare information, including information for students with disabilities or special needs;
- Relevant skills training programmes;
- Opportunities to interact with other research students and staff, both within the School and elsewhere;
- Relevant Health and Safety and ethics information.

Suggestions

- Local induction events would normally be organised by School / Department Directors of PGR Studies.
- You should ensure that students do participate in local induction programmes, and follow-up with them on any unanswered issues or questions.
- In addition to the formal induction topics listed above, a personal local induction can be very helpful and might include:
 - Introductions to immediate colleagues (students, research staff, academic staff, support staff);
 - Entitlements as a research student;
 - Local protocols – office hours, ordering, degree of formality expected etc.;

¹ <http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/graduateschool/pgrinterviewgoodpracticeguide.pdf>

- Local facilities – toilets, coffee, photocopying, IT, information sources, social activities;
 - Local health, safety and security.
- Several Schools and Departments have found it helpful to run some form of ‘buddy’ system, with more experienced PhD students acting as ‘buddies’ for new students.

Training and Development

A PhD programme is no longer an ‘apprenticeship’ whereby the student simply learns ‘at the feet’ of an experienced supervisor. Students are required to undergo a wider training and development programme. Within the University, this is now coordinated by the new University-wide Graduate School. As far as training is concerned, students undergo a coordinated three-tier programme, with training being provided at three levels

- Locally; with any subject-specific training being organised and run by Schools and Departments.
- At a broad disciplinary level; primarily, science / life science as opposed to arts & humanities, social science, business, delivered from the Graduate School.
- Centrally; across all disciplines, delivered from the Graduate School, with input from other University providers.

Levels 2 and 3 are incorporated into our Reading Researcher Development Programme.²

The University Code of Practice (Section 5) requires that:

- (a) Training should be provided for all research students, including those working part-time or ‘working-away’ from the University. Such training should involve both research skills specific to a particular subject area and also additional (also called transferable or generic) skills training.
- (b) At the start of a student’s research programme, the Supervisor, School / Department Director of PGR Studies and the student should review the training needs of that student, through a process of Learning Needs Analysis³, identifying areas of existing competence and areas which will need further development in order to enhance the student’s research abilities and personal development. Such analysis will inform the student’s research training programme and will be an element of the annual review of progress, particularly at the Confirmation of Registration stage.
- (c) CSTD organises courses and workshops for research students who will be involved in teaching or demonstrating. Any research student employed by the University to support the teaching and learning of other students for five or more contact hours in an academic year should receive appropriate training before he or she begins to teach.

² <http://www.reading.ac.uk/graduateschool/skillstrainingprogramme>

³ <http://www.reading.ac.uk/graduateschool/skillstrainingprogramme/gs-assess-training-needs.aspx>

Suggestions

- Adopt a positive attitude towards training and encourage your students to do likewise;
- Ask about participation in wider training events during supervisory meetings;
- In addition to more formal training events, encourage attendance at departmental seminars, academic conferences, summer schools, etc;
- The Vitae website has lots of useful information for research students to help them with their career development. It also has useful information for supervisors;
- The Student Employment, Experience and Careers Centre runs postgraduate events and has a list of resources for postgraduate students on their website, including a link to *Beyond the PhD* (a new online career resource tailored specifically for arts and humanities PhD researchers).

Responsibilities

It is important from the outset that supervisors and students are clear on their respective responsibilities

The responsibilities of the supervisor include:

- giving guidance regarding all aspects of the project;
- helping students to carry out an analysis of training and learning needs, and ensuring they participate in appropriate training events;
- maintaining contact through regular meetings;
- being accessible to the student at other appropriate times when advice may be needed;
- giving advice on the necessary completion dates of successive stages of the work so that the thesis may be submitted within the scheduled time;
- requesting written work as appropriate, and returning such work with constructive criticism and in reasonable time;
- arranging as appropriate for the student to talk about the work to staff or graduate seminars;
- reporting in writing at least annually on the student's progress to the School Director of PGR Studies and the student (in line with designated University procedures⁴);
- advising on appropriate dissemination activities (including publication), external engagement, networking etc;
- when the thesis is submitted, sending a written report to the Examiners via the Exams Office;
- preparing students for their viva, and advising on any subsequent corrections they may have to undertake;
- undertaking training and other development events to help undertake the role of the supervisor effectively.

⁴ <http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/graduateschool/pgrmonitoring.pdf>

The responsibilities of the student include:

- adhering to the Universities regulations governing research integrity, academic misconduct, and ethical standards;
- discussing with the supervisor preferred ways of working and agreeing a schedule of meetings;
- taking the initiative in raising problems or difficulties;
- agreeing and observing any necessary health and safety precautions;
- carrying out a Learning Needs Analysis and attending appropriate training and development events;
- carrying out research in an ethical way and in line with University procedures for Good Practice;
- maintaining the progress of the work in accordance with the stages agreed with the supervisor, including in particular the presentation of written materials as required in sufficient time to allow for comments and discussion;
- providing at least annually (as required in University regulations) a formal written report to the School, outlining progress during the preceding year, the contents of which should normally be discussed with the supervisor/s before submission;
- as part of the above, completing the survey on monitoring supervisory arrangements (submitted in confidence to the School / Department Director of PGR Studies);
- being honest when reporting on progress;
- deciding when he or she wishes to submit within the prescribed period of registration, taking due account of the supervisor's opinion, and informing the Examinations Office;
- shortly before submission of their thesis, informing supervisor(s) of any special circumstances which they believe may have adversely affected their research;
- showing their supervisor(s) the final draft of their thesis before submission;

Joint Supervision

It is now normal University practice for there to be more than one supervisor for each research student. This might be a second member of staff from within the same School / Department, or from a different one. The additional supervisor may be part of a small supervisory team, which provides advice and oversees the progress of the student. Where joint projects involve an external organisations (for example, as is usually the case for Professional Doctorate students), a supervisor from within that organisation is often appointed as the second (or sometimes third) supervisor.

Dual supervision may take a number of different forms. For example:

- Both supervisors might have good knowledge of the subject area of the thesis and contribute equally to the supervision
- One supervisor might have good knowledge of the main subject area, and the second might have expertise in using a particular methodology that is relevant to the thesis. In this case, the second supervisor would play a lesser role in the project.

- The second supervisor might not have good knowledge of the main subject area but would be appointed on the basis of his or her supervisory experience, again playing a more minor role.

For joint supervision to be most effective, it is important for there to be clarity, both for the student and the members of staff involved, about the roles of the respective supervisors, as suggested below. It is also worth taking account of the following:

Suggestions

- Define respective roles and make clear to all;
- Exploit complementary skills, knowledge and networks;
- Ensure good communication and clear reporting lines, including keeping clear, agreed records of supervisory meetings, which are sometimes essential in the event of disagreements;
- Try not to give conflicting advice;
- Decide in advance how monitoring of progress will work, in accordance with the Code of Practice on Research Students;
- Be prepared to discuss any tensions openly with an aim to resolve;

Supervisory Meetings

There are various different types of supervisory meeting, including face-to-face, email exchanges, Skype, and other forms of digital communication. At the outset, supervisors and students should agree on the appropriate frequency and nature of meetings and other communications. Students must appreciate what is a reasonable expectation in terms of access to supervisors' time, and supervisors must ensure that they will have enough contact with students to allow the appropriate level of guidance and knowledge about student progress.

Where there is more than one supervisor (which is now normal University practice) it is important for there to be clarity on which supervisors will participate in which type of meeting, and who the student should contact in relation to different types of query or concern.

The frequency and pattern of supervisory meetings may alter throughout the student's research programme, dependent on the particular stage reached. Supervisors and students should agree a minimum number of meetings each term and for vacation periods. The University Code of Practice recommends that, normally, the minimum number of meetings should be eight per annum, and that there should be more meetings initially.

A brief note of all formal meetings should be agreed and kept by the student and supervisor/s.

Suggestions

The first supervisory meeting is vital in setting up your working relationship. Some ideas on how to approach it include:

- Discuss mutual expectations of the supervision process, explain what the student can and cannot expect of you and what you expect of them;
- Agree the nature of your meetings including frequency, timing and length, the type of guidance, comments and feedback to be expected;
- Explain that part of your job is to provide feedback to help them progress– make sure they appreciate that constructive criticism is an important part of academic practice;
- Discuss the practical arrangements for meetings – arranging them, cancelling them, setting the agenda, balance between drop-in and arranged meetings, record keeping, etc;
- Agree normal mechanisms for contact and emergency contacts should they be needed;
- Look ahead through the year and flag your main marking periods, major conferences, grant or publications deadlines so that the student knows when you are unlikely to be available.

General Ideas for meetings:

- Supervisors and students should both book dates in advance in diaries. Meetings can always be cancelled if not needed;
- Allow time for discussing any pastoral issues that might arise;
- Where possible, base meetings around brief written inputs from students;
- Balance positive feedback on achievements and constructive criticism;
- Leave time and space for intellectual discussion;
- Agree what should be achieved before the next meeting.

Supervisory Styles

Different supervisors inevitably have different styles. However, the same supervisor may need to adapt his or her personal style to suit the needs of particular students.

Suggestions

- Decide on the right style for you and your student;
- Find an appropriate balance between heavy-handed dominance and hands-off neglect;
- Consider questions such as;
 - How much should you push your views as opposed to giving them freedom to learn from their mistakes?
 - How much should you do for them?
- Be sensitive to how students respond to your style and be prepared to adjust it, if appropriate (see below);
- Seek help from more experienced colleagues if you have any concerns.

It is important to remember that the same style will not suit all types of student. You need to be sensitive to different types of student, their different motivations for doing a PhD, and their different needs and constraints.

For example:

- A full-time UK student aged 25 (with no dependants);
- A full-time International student, (with a spouse and children);
- A full-time member of academic staff who is new to research;
- A research assistant who is registered for a PhD whilst being employed as an RA;
- A Professional Doctorate student (research associate) who may have been working in industry or some other sector for many years.

Supervising International Students

In line with other UK universities, we have an increasingly high proportion of research students from overseas. It is worth taking the following points into account when acting as a supervisor of an International student.

- Ensure that new students fully understand their role and that of the supervisor/s, and what support they should expect;
- Be wary of students being overly deferential or treating you as near infallible;
- Encourage them to seek help and to discuss problems with others where appropriate;
- Try to be sensitive to cultural differences and be aware of your own implicit assumptions about these;
- Show an interest in their general welfare (many have significant financial / family problems);
- Appreciate that:
 - some may have different concepts of time and may not appreciate the importance of punctuality;
 - Some may have different interpersonal space norms;
 - Some may have different religious beliefs and practices, and you need to make allowances for these;
 - Some can have language difficulties, and particular difficulty with writing for academic purposes.

Supervising part-time students

Around 25% of postgraduate research students study on a part-time basis. They tend to be a very diverse population, with a wide age range and types of background experience. Most of them are in either full-time or part-time employment or have caring responsibilities. Many live a significant distance from the University.

A recent study, involving a survey and number of focus groups, showed many students felt that their Schools and Departments did not always appreciate, and take account of, their constraints. For example, some reported being asked to attend a meeting and being given only one time slot in the middle of the day, which necessitated their taking a day's leave. Other referred to staff changing meeting dates and times at very short notice. Students also reported a lack of sense of community and feeling out of touch. Several also noted that part-time study could seem very open-ended, leading motivation to flag, and felt that being set additional milestones would be helpful. Interestingly, a large proportion of the students mistakenly believed that they have more time available for their PhD than full-time students, which is not the case. This might be one of the factors leading to the significantly lower submission and completion rates for part-time students.

When supervising part-time students, it is therefore important to understand the particular needs and constraints of the student and agree a style of working that works for them and for you.

The ups and downs of doing a PhD

You should be aware that most PhD students will experience a range of emotions throughout the life of their PhD and that these can have an impact on their performance and their needs from your supervision. Phillips & Pugh (2000) describe a common pattern:

Year 1

Enthusiastic – at the start of the project with lots of expectations and ambitions;
Anxious – am I clever enough, when will they spot I am a fraud;
Disappointed – I have not achieved as much as I expected;
Isolated – feeling alone even when other PhD students are at hand.

Year 2

'Getting nowhere syndrome' – boredom with the routine of research;
Interested – really involved and having the confidence to solve problems;
Frustrated – time constraints impact on capacity to follow all areas of interest.

Year 3

Independent – less reliance on supervisor for knowledge of field;
Job to be finished – the thesis becomes a task;
Stressed!

Strategies for managing emotional problems

Several students experience some level of emotional problem during the course of their studies. These can often be helped with support from supervisors, Directors of PGR Studies, and fellow students. When dealing with such situations it might help if you:

- Encourage students to participate in discussion groups with peers in order to share experiences;
- Try to discourage them from working (exclusively) at home to reduce feelings of isolation;
- Construct a timetable with lots of achievable milestones, and provide positive reinforcement when they achieve each milestone;
- Encourage them to take part in relevant social activities;
- Encourage them to take proper breaks and holidays.

If this level of support does not help, you should encourage the student to seek professional counselling support.

Communicating Academic Standards

The University Code of Practice states that the responsibilities of supervisor(s) include giving guidance about the nature of the research and the standard expected.

Suggestions

- It is essential that students are aware of relevant and appropriate standards of academic practice, as set out in the University Quality Assurance in Research manual. Supervisors should ensure that students understand the relevant standards and necessary practices in terms of how they apply to their particular area of study, and what would happen if students transgressed these standards.
- Supervisors should also ensure that students are fully aware of relevant ethical standards and that any research is conducted ethically and in line with University (and, where relevant, other bodies') guidelines.
- Students often grasp the idea that they need to make an original contribution to knowledge but then worry that their work will fall short. Discuss with them what originality might mean in the context of their research. For example:
 - Bringing a new interpretation to known material;
 - Developing a new product or improving an existing one;
 - Reinterpreting an existing theory in a new context;
 - Developing a new research tool or technique or using them in a new context;
 - Developing a new model or perspective;
 - Bringing new evidence to an old issue;
 - Testing an existing idea in a new way;
 - Being cross-disciplinary and using different methodologies;
 - Investigating a study on something not previously known.
- Get students to look through a good recent thesis so they appreciate what they are aiming for. Discuss with them the strengths of the thesis and areas where it could have been improved.
- Encourage attendance at academic conferences.

- Encourage involvement in local seminars and research group meetings to discuss and review papers.
- Encourage involvement in relevant events organised by the University Graduate School.

Supporting Writing

According to Delamont et al, 2004, there are two useful golden rules to share with your students

- Write early and write often:
 - The more you write the easier it gets;
 - If you write every day it becomes a habit;
 - Tiny bits of writing soon add up to something substantial;
 - The longer you leave it unwritten, the worse the task becomes.
- Don't get it right, get it written:
 - Until something is on paper, no one can help you to get it right;
 - Drafting is a vital stage in clarifying thought;
 - Start writing the part that is clearest in your head, not necessarily what will be read first;
 - Drafting reveals the bits that need more work better than any other process.

Other suggestions:

- Ensure all practical and other empirical work is written up as student progresses;
- At appropriate time, encourage the early drafting of a thesis framework i.e. contents list or long summary;
- Encourage writing of other reports, summaries or articles and involvement in paper reviewing;
- Get students to learn to use EndNote (bibliographic tool);
- Work and re-work together on a couple of pages of writing to show the academic style required;
- Signpost student to other people's writing as examples of good practice;
- Ensure student has easy access to a PC;
- Give regular, prompt and constructive feedback on written work;
- Be aware of possible symptoms of writer's block and how to help students deal with it; You should direct them to relevant courses in the Graduate School's Reading Researcher Development Programme.

Providing Feedback

When providing feedback on students' work, it is worth thinking about the following:

- Show that the purpose of the feedback is to make progress;
- State positive aspects first;
- Maintain a balance between appreciation and constructive criticism;

- Present criticism impersonally;
- Present feedback clearly to reduce ambiguity;
- Ensure students understand it;
- Discuss how to address any negative aspects; i.e. agree a way forward.

Monitoring Progress

It is important that students' progress is regularly monitored to help ensure timely completion and provide necessary support.

For PhDs, the University Code of Practice (Section 6) requires that:

- (a) Schools or Departments are responsible for monitoring the progress of research students, via an agreed 'monitoring team'. It is a requirement that all research students should have their progress formally assessed at least on an annual basis.
- (b) In the first year, the annual review should take place during the third term of registration and should comprise consideration of at least a separate written report from both the student and their supervisor. It should also include an evaluation by the student of their supervisory arrangements. Students should also make at least two oral presentations of their work during the course of their programme. If a student fails to submit a written report within two weeks of the due date, and no extension has been agreed, they will be sent a warning letter from the Head of School to inform them that if they do not submit a report within three weeks (a total of five weeks from the original due date), they will be subject to the University's procedures for Neglect of Work and Unsatisfactory Progress.
- (f) During the second year of registration (or part-time equivalent) and normally no later than the 5th term of registration, the School 'monitoring team' should consider the evidence for confirmation of registration. A decision will be made on the basis of at least a written report from the student providing evidence of their research ability; students will normally be interviewed in person by the 'monitoring team' as part of the assessment progress. A written report should also be made by the student's supervisor/s, who will not be present when this decision is made.
- (g) Where the confirmation process has resulted in a student not being assigned to the degree programme which he or she sought, they may appeal against that decision.

Some of these points will also apply to monitoring progress on other research programmes.

A full guide to monitoring and assessing research student progress is available at:

<http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/qualitysupport/pgrmonitoring.pdf>

A summary of current procedures for cases of Neglect of Work and Unsatisfactory Progress is available at:

http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/Calendar/New_Section_F_2010.pdf (Ordinance XVII)

A guide to procedures for appeals against Confirmation of Registration decisions is available at:

<http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/qualitysupport/pgrconfirmationappeals.pdf>

Examination Preparation

As already noted, the University Code of Practice (Section 4a) requires that:

- Students should decide when he or she wishes to submit within the prescribed period of registration, taking due account of the supervisor's opinion, and informing the Examinations Office;
- Shortly before submission of their thesis, students should inform their supervisor(s) of any special circumstances which they believe may have adversely affected their research;
- They should also show their supervisor(s) the final draft of their thesis before submission;
- When a thesis is submitted, supervisors should send a written report to the Examiners via the Examinations Office.

The *Rules for Submission* are available at:

<http://www.reading.ac.uk/Exams/ThesesRules.pdf>

The *Guide for Examiners for Higher Degrees by Thesis* is available at

<http://www.reading.ac.uk/Exams/phdexaminers.pdf>

A Good Practice Guide for Examiners of PhDs and other Research Degree Programmes is available at

http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/graduateschool/PhDExaminers_Goodpracticeguide.pdf

Important points to note

- Internal and external examiners are appointed by the University Director of PGR Studies, on the basis of nominations from the School / Department Director of PGR Studies and / or Head of School;
- A supervisor may not serve as an Internal Examiner;
- A supervisor may not attend the *viva voce* examination unless there are exceptional reasons for this. In this is the case, the External and Internal Examiners and the student must unanimously agree that the supervisor may be present to observe;
- The candidate has the right to speak to the Examiners alone at the end of the examination;
- The supervisor should be available for consultation by the Examiners at the time of the *viva voce* examination;
- If the supervisor is invited with the student to hear the examiners' feedback, supervisors should remember that they are not entitled to challenge or argue with the examiners' view in any way. Their role is simply to be there to share the good news (where this is the case) or hear any comments about how the thesis needs amending.

Suggestions

- Try to recommend an external examiner who is not likely to be strongly opposed to the student's methodological or ideological approach;

- External examiners must be 'independent'. They should not be current or recent collaborators of the supervisor.

In addition

- Explain to students how the viva is likely to be structured and what they should expect;
- Create an atmosphere in regular meetings where students are accustomed to articulating their arguments and responding to constructive feedback;
- Get students to think of the worst questions they might be asked and work with them to develop answers;;
- Consider a mock viva, with questions such as
 - Why did you choose this topic/method/sample?
 - What would you do differently if you were starting this work now?
 - What are your main/most important findings?
 - What problems did you face and how did you overcome them?

Summary Pointers to Good Practice

- Help students to see their PhDs as a structured programme with a beginning, middle and fixed end;
- Ensure that the thesis topic / research project is manageable and achievable in the time period and with resources available;
- Ensure students undertake appropriate training;
- Provide timely, clear and constructive feedback on their work;
- Try to be consistent in your dealings with students;
- Show an active interest in your student (as a person) and in his or her work;
- Encourage an open exchange of ideas and show respect for their views;
- Try to be open and supportive but avoid becoming overly close to students while supervising them;
- Look for ways to support your students in their academic careers by helping them establish appropriate networks and gain an academic reputation;
- Help students to become independent researchers (who no longer need your supervision);
- Keep your own supervisory skills updated by attending periodic update sessions.

Reference

Delamont, s., Atkinson, P, & Parry, O. (2004). Supervising the Doctorate: A Guide to Success. 2nd Ed. Maidenhead. Open University Press

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