Paper: Pre-University Qualifications for International Student Mobility – the Cambridge Perspective

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Stream: Business & International Education

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Date/Time: Friday, 8 October, 12:40 PM - 01:35 PM
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Executive Summary

The IDP Education Australia Report (2002), ‘Global Student Mobility 2025’, forecasts a four fold increase in the global demand for higher education between 2000 and 2025, over two thirds of the growth coming from Asia. International student mobility is an accelerating trend. However, meeting the needs of students who engage in international higher education is not just about numbers. At its heart are the opportunities afforded to ‘broaden the outlook of individuals - increasing understanding and humanity’ (CEC UKCOSA Report, 2000).

The curriculum and assessment systems that prepare individuals for their higher education experience lay the foundations for realising these aims - students able to consolidate their experiences into a robust internationalism of thought and perspective.

This session will describe an approach to curriculum and assessment design which has been developed to encourage the skills and understanding required in the effective international student and to prepare the intellectual and business leaders of the next generation.

Introduction

International student mobility is indeed an accelerating trend. The IDP Education Australia Report, ‘Global Student Mobility – Forecasts of the Global Demand for Higher Education 2025’ (2002) suggests a four fold increase in the demand for higher education from non-national students between 2000 and 2025. The trend is reinforced by ‘Vision 2020 Forecasting International Student Mobility – A UK Perspective’, a report produced in liaison with IDP. Per annum growth rates are given as 7.8% for students coming from Asia, 5.2% from Africa and 4.2% from the Middle East. The research carried out by IDP, by the British Council and Universities UK highlights a number of strategic issues related to the quality of provision and the degree of competition in the market for students. The presentations of this Conference demonstrate how much careful planning and preparation is being directed at gearing institutions in the HE sector to respond to the challenges and opportunities that these significant levels of expansion present.

My focus, however, is on the way in which pre-university qualifications can prepare individual learners effectively for their future mobility. The students involved in this emerging phenomenon are for the most part the successful achievers in their own countries, who will go on to become the intellectual and business leaders of the future. But they have also been referred to as ‘global nomads’ (Useem, 1976), who can too easily lose a sense of identity with their home culture, fail to acquire that of the host country and feel at home only in the ‘interstitial culture’ of the globally mobile student. Viewed positively, this creates a world in which national barriers diminish in importance and a ‘third culture’ is created by individuals able to network across societies. On the other hand, such global nomads can experience a degree of cultural alienation, which may compromise the integrity of their own value systems and sense of identity. The educational systems that prepare students for higher education therefore, play a vital role in laying the foundations for ensuring that students are able to consolidate their experience into a robust internationalism of thought and perspective without the loss of their own identity.
For those of us engaged in international education in whatever form there are always individual student stories which encapsulate the vision of our enterprise. Mine occurred earlier this year in an international school in India. A student, recently arrived from Nigeria, stood alone on the podium, singing a national song not of his own culture and language but of India and in Hindi. The task was daunting and his confidence was occasionally shaken by the fact that his voice was on the verge of breaking; but it was evident that he fully understood the cultural significance of the act. He was clearly determined to place his unique stamp on the school and to do it in a way which showed full respect for the culture in which he found himself. This ‘global nomad’ was committing himself, was putting down roots. By the time that young boy is ready to move on to higher education in whatever country, as one of the increasing legion of internationally mobile students, his cultural awareness and understanding will stand him in good stead to exploit to the full his opportunities and potential.

This paper describes an approach to curriculum and assessment design which is likely to be instrumental in producing effective international students, such as the young Nigerian boy of my example, and goes on to analyse the ways in which such a curriculum can lay the foundations for equipping students with the skills required to work and prosper in a global economy.

First a note of background: the University of Cambridge has for nearly one and a half centuries been engaged in the provision of pre-university qualifications both in the UK and around the world through its Examination Syndicate (UCLES) more recently known in this case as the University of Cambridge International Examinations (CIE). Although it can point to provision in a large number of countries around the world, historically its international activities have been dominated by partnerships with the countries of the Commonwealth who sought the provision of UK qualifications overseas. This was the period of a global diet of British History, of Jane Austen and the study of the glacial features of the English Lake District. Over the last two decades, however, CIE’s commitment has been to the provision of qualifications more appropriately designed to meet the needs of students in countries outside the UK. In recent years the largest volumes of students using CIE international qualifications are in Southeast Asia, in the Middle East and in sub-Saharan Africa – in fact the areas of strongest growth in international student mobility. Levels of entries in India and in China, in particular, have seen double figure percentage growth in the last few years and there is also increasing demand from the USA.

CIE qualifications are principally taken by students after approximately eleven, twelve or thirteen years of education. The earliest of these, the IGCSE is taken by students, typically in international schools, following a broad-based curriculum with examinations being taken in six to ten subjects. In some instances students offering fewer subjects in IGCSE examinations are taking them as a complement to their own national curricula programmes. An overarching award, the International Certificate of Education can additionally be awarded to those who achieve pass grades in seven subjects across each of five subject groups. Following on from IGCSE, after either one or two more years of education, students take the International Advanced Subsidiary qualification (AS) and International A Levels. First examined in 2001, the AS qualification has a value equivalent to half an A Level in terms of university admission and has proved popular in extending the breadth of students’ studies. The choices which students make with respect to the subjects studied or to the degree of specialisation are very open and limited only by the policy of an individual school or the student’s own ability and interests, making this a very flexible curriculum. Performance outcomes are expressed in grades (A* to G in the case of IGCSE and A to E in the case of A Level or AS level). Each of the CIE qualifications is well recognised in terms of university entry. HE admission policies vary with regard to matriculation requirements. In the US, for example, the education system comprises twelve years of school education followed by four year undergraduate programmes, whereas in the UK undergraduate programmes begin after thirteen years of school and last for three years. In the US many universities will accept 5 IGCSE passes at grade C or higher as meeting admission requirements for freshman level courses. AS and A levels usually receive college credit exemptions in the US of up to one year. In other countries a combination of AS and/or A levels meet university admission requirements.
In developing its international qualifications CIE’s curriculum and assessment models have three key dimensions:

- The range and design of syllabuses available must recognise and foster students’ national identity through sensitivity to local language and culture;
- Qualifications must develop an internationalism of thought and perspective; and
- A skills-based approach should build transferable skill sets which enable individuals to participate in and contribute to a global economy.

### Recognising and Fostering Students’ National Identity

It is widely recognised that a learner’s ability to respond to a new set of cultural norms and values becomes all the stronger if his own sense of cultural identity is well validated. From the socio-psychological perspective the sense of one’s own identity may be seen as the platform by which the learner can access other cultural perspectives; from the constructivist view, one’s own cultural identity remains the essential tool through which the plethora of data and stimuli are structured and interpreted. Either way, it is important that the provision of international education effectively responds to the needs of the local and the national. In fact there are those who consider that the weakening of territorial barriers by the impact of the digital age makes this of increasing importance. Rief Miller, for example, writing in an OECD review (1996) comments that:

“In the Knowledge Economy a distinctive point of view and the culture that makes it possible are becoming more not less important. What matters is the capacity to mine the raw material of the information age – data – and refine it into a specific (local) way of understanding tasks and products.” (Miller, 1996, p 16).

This principle of encouraging a strong sense of national identity is well recognised within the six hundred plus different qualifications available within the CIE portfolio. There is no subject prescription and national curriculum bodies or individual schools are able to design a locally appropriate curriculum from the range available. This includes almost two hundred different language syllabuses which transcend a standard UK-centric approach of English as a first language plus French, German or Spanish as a foreign language option. An array of African, Indian and other Asian languages provide a clear example of the way in which the specific ‘uses, forms and effects’ (Eckstein and Noah, 1993) of the curriculum and its assessments are flexed to meet local requirements.

Appropriate texts are sourced to supply literature syllabuses. In some cases the texts of a particular language offer a rich and readily accessible resource to those brought up in Western literary tradition; for others the symbolism and purpose of a country’s texts must be carefully understood in order for appropriate assessment objectives to be designed. Syllabuses focused on encouraging students’ knowledge and understanding of sacred texts play a further and important role in the development of students’ own identity. Adopting a broad definition of culture as ‘a shared way of life’ will, in some circumstances also require syllabuses designed to relate to a specific aspect of the local economy. For example, the development of a CIE qualification in Fisheries Science designed to meet the needs of the fishing industry in the Indian Ocean and Agriculture syllabuses tailored to local climate and traditions. Also important is cross-curricula provision such as Bangladesh, Pakistan or India Studies which CIE provides to enable students to know and integrate elements of local studies to understand the original development of the culture that they experience.

### Developing an Internationalism of Thought and Perspective

Moving beyond the way in which CIE qualifications underscore the importance of students’ acquisition of a sound sense of national identity in an international context, the CIE curriculum and assessments are also designed to foster internationalism in the curriculum. An obvious example of this is presented by the range of Humanities syllabuses. The very concept of
internationalism in education is so rooted in a tradition of liberal humanism, emphasising awareness and respect for the cultures and values of others, that the nature of provision in subjects such as Literature or History is all important. Each opportunity to build international awareness in this way is taken in the CIE curriculum. The current IGCSE Literature syllabus, for example, involves the study of the work of the Indian novelist, Anita Desai, the South African, Dalene Matthee and the American-Chinese Amy Tan. Charles Dickens and Graham Greene also find a place in this cosmopolitan gathering. The focus of the syllabus is to encourage students to respond to very different viewpoints and to develop the skills of analysis and synthesis in so doing. In similar vein the History syllabus focuses on International Relations rather than British History and again fosters a skills based approach, promoting an understanding of the nature and use of historical evidence and encouraging international understanding.

From time to time students are asked for their views on the Cambridge curriculum and frequently point to levels of increased international awareness as an outcome. As expressed by a student “an international education with CIE broadens your horizons and makes you think globally whilst also giving one a notion of one’s place in the Universe” (an IGCSE student, UAE).

The same concern for the development of international awareness moves well beyond the Humanities curriculum however. IGCSE Chemistry (2004), for example, includes among its aims to:

"Enable (students) to acquire sufficient understanding and knowledge to become confident citizens in a technological world… stimulate interest in, and care for, the environment and… promote an awareness that scientific theories and methods have developed, and continue to do so, as a result of co-operative activities of groups and individuals; and that the study and practice of science are subject to social, economic, technological, ethical and cultural influences and limitations; [and that its applications] may be both beneficial and detrimental to the individual, the community and the environment; … and transcend national boundaries”

There are also integrative subjects such as ‘Environmental Management’ which are concerned with “education for sustainable development in a world where the security of resources and life-sustaining systems is endangered by human impact” (IGCSE syllabus for Environmental Management, 2004) and which had as their origins international movements such as the Brundtland Report (1987) and the ongoing debate which occurred in the context of the UNCED World Summit in Brazil in 1992.

In reflecting upon what makes an education international, Hayden et al. (2000) refer to the conclusion of a survey of international school students, alumni and teachers that ‘open mindedness, flexibility of thinking and action’ were the most defining characteristics of people who felt ‘international’ as a result of their education. The above examples provide a glimpse of the way in which this is delivered through the individual aims of subjects in Cambridge’s portfolio. For each it is underscored by clear statements of the weighting of assessment objectives, which provide a unique cognitive mix.

Building transferable skills to enable students to participate in a global economy

Moving beyond the international to the global, in all countries of rapidly growing demand there is consensus that a new educational agenda is required to empower individuals to respond to the realities of rapid socio-economic and technological global change. ‘Globalisation’ describes the way in which dominant ideas and developments are diffused across different social groups by an Information and Communications revolution. The CIE perspective is that educating students effectively for the global economy is the most challenging task that confronts assessment organisations. Meeting the educational needs of the local context, developing respect for the culture and value systems of others via ‘internationalism’ represent familiar territory but the pace and dynamism of the globalisation agenda can seem less well charted. CIE’s definition of the new educational agenda is that it requires:
• educational goals appropriate to living and working in a knowledge economy
• new processes of curriculum delivery which develop transferable skills
• new models of assessment which encourage learning skills as much as measure outcomes.

The individual components of this agenda are far from new – the concern with transferable skills, for example, long pre-dated discussions of a knowledge economy (e.g. see UK Government reports on English and Mathematics, Bullock, 1975 and Cockroft, 1982). There is a sense in which providing feedback to the learner has always been recognised as an integral part of the learning process. However, the fusion of these ideas in today’s educational debates creates a new emphasis that one of the most important aims of the educational process in the 21st century should be to equip individuals with a range of thinking and learning skills with particular focus on the skills of problem-solving, creative and critical thinking and team-working.

Without such skills individuals will be unable to adapt to the fundamental change in the working environment that faces them. Tom Peters, discussing the impact of change reminds us that a brief generation ago it took 108 workers 5 days to unload a typical container ship – a job which nowadays 8 employees can complete in a day. The world of work for which we today prepare our students looks set to undergo even more radical change.

CIE’s commitment to this agenda is mediated through a curriculum and assessment model that emphasises the acquisition of ‘deep understanding’ in learning – where that deep understanding is likely to involve higher order cognitive activities as described in a number of cognitive taxonomies (Bloom, 1956, Vygotsky, 1987).

The ‘deep understanding’ that characterises the Cambridge curriculum follows a constructivist model of active learning. IGCSE modes of assessment, for example, emphasise investigative approaches to learning and the application of skills, knowledge and understanding. The approach recognises that ‘recall’ becomes a relatively less useful skill for individuals in today’s world of rapid change – instead understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating and creating – the higher order skills of a re-worked Bloom’s taxonomy assume vital importance for all and not simply the gifted few. Thus, in all CIE syllabuses clear specifications for the weighting of assessment objectives are stated. In the Biology syllabus, for example, only 25% of the assessment objective weighting is assigned to knowledge recall; 25% is allocated to the application of that knowledge; a further 30% relates to objectives associated with handling information and solving problems, and a final 20% to experimental skills and abilities. Pre- and post-session checks in the development of the assessment instrument ensure that the balance of these weightings is maintained. The investigative approach at item level can be illustrated by the type of question posed. For example in IGCSE History (2004), this difference entails the avoidance of questions such as:

‘Give reasons why Roosevelt won the 1932 presidential election in the USA’

and the inclusion of styles such as:

The most important reason why Roosevelt won the 1932 presidential election was Hoover’s unpopularity. Do you agree? Explain your answer.

The first encourages rote-learning and does not call upon the skills of independent thought, analysis, and evaluation required of the second. There is emphasis on the use of judgement and creativity, interpretation, evaluation, reflection or meta-cognition which has close consonance with those skills required by a knowledge society. Further, an emphasis on the encouragement of conceptual integration, whether within or between subject domains, together with an appreciation of underpinning structure or principle would seem to provide more effectively for the transferability of knowledge or skill. These are the skills that underpin learning to learn. We believe that these are the skills universities look for.
What is undeniable today is that as the amount of information available continues to double... treble - academic success will depend less and less on rote learning and more on a students’ ability to process information and use it in a discriminating manner. Learning to learn cited as the ‘ultimate life-skill for the 21st century’ and the first of what UNESCO emphasises as the four pillars of education, becomes far more important. Let me illustrate this with an example – the Cambridge curriculum emphasises the development of habits of critical enquiry, of individual research and the encouragement of problem-solving through application. A couple of decades ago, a young student in one of the countries following a Cambridge curriculum noticed an odd phenomenon in an investigation. Hot water appeared to freeze more rapidly than cold. Completely counter-intuitive, he must have done something wrong in the investigation we might think. He experimented but was unable to convince his teachers. He persisted in his investigations, in fact it took some years before the experts accepted his discovery that in certain circumstances hot water will freeze more quickly than cold. This phenomenon is now known as the Mpemba effect after the young student. A concern for accuracy does compel me to admit that Aristotle, Descartes and Bacon had each previously described this phenomenon, and had done so without the benefit of CIE’s guiding influence in the school curriculum – their descriptions had simply become lost in the mists of time. But this example does seem to me to sum up what we mean by the learning empowerment which a skills-based approach encourages.

The skills which this student had acquired enabled him to critically evaluate and analyse information, and gave him the confidence to believe in his own judgement and conclusions rather than received authority. Such skills which young people acquire in education become far more truly transferable than the ability to memorise canons of fact. These are the skills which employers and universities look for in today’s young people. These are the skills that societies need.

The effective design of a school curriculum through the coherent aims and assessment objectives of each of the subjects that comprise it, plays a vital part in securing the achievement of such skills. A cross-curriculum approach, for example, that encourages students to manage their own learning – by setting tasks that involve research and investigation and which encourage reflection on outcomes - is vital. In IGCSE, in AS and A Level there are opportunities for extended essays and for individual research projects that emphasise the importance of these skills and which encourage students to experiment, to try new approaches and to deal with risk in their learning. As learners we learn all too soon the embarrassment of failure and learn to play a very safe game which militates against the development of the skills of critical enquiry. Thomas Edison had many, many failed attempts in developing the light-bulb – but when an assistant asked whether he felt a failure he was able to reply very simply that on the contrary he now knew a considerable number of ways not to design a light-bulb. So we must empower our students to experiment, to try new ways and to learn from their mistakes rather than asking us as teachers for the clues to immediate success in task outcomes. We need to encourage effective learners who are resilient – they will ‘give it a go’ even when the outcome and the way to proceed are uncertain. And although CIE’s mark schemes are closely specified, examiners are given the authority in their marking to recognise and reward an unexpected solution, or new interpretation of the question.

This emphasis which Cambridge places upon the encouragement of critical and creative thinking skills in the curriculum is further reflected in specifically targeted curriculum programmes and qualifications in Thinking Skills. One of these, part of Cambridge’s post-16 provision, the AS qualification in Thinking Skills is certificated with an equivalence of one half of an A Level and is widely accepted for university admission. Its structured programme and assessments encourage curriculum transactions which promote students’ ability to critically examine evidence, to draw conclusions, to analyse an argument and to present well-reasoned justifications – vital skills in today’s world of information-overload. To reiterate the 21st century imperative - young people need to be able to adapt to rapid change in order to make the most of emerging opportunities. The skills of analysis, argument and critical thinking enhance their ability to cope with the unfamiliar with confidence.

We firmly believe that the encouragement of critical thinking programmes in schools play a vital part in the modern world where knowledge becomes obsolete so quickly and what is
needed is people who are good at thinking through unfamiliar problems. By examining
students in critical thinking we provide feedback on performance and sound evidence of skills
which identify potential in higher education and the kinds of skills university admissions
officers are looking for. How many of us recognise the very able student who when faced with
an unfamiliar problem will nevertheless simply remark that ‘it’s not on the syllabus’ – too
diffident to apply well-understood principles to an unfamiliar context. To borrow a definition
coined by Piaget; we should view ability as knowing what to do when we don’t know what to
do and develop in our students the skills of critical thinking and problem-solving. In the words
of a CIE student coming from the Middle East; “One of the most distinguishing features of an
education with Cambridge is the emphasis on independent thinking and analysis of a given
subject. This has taught me to have a directed approach towards my subjects, and in a
broader aspect, has influenced my critical perception of the world” (IGCSE Student, UAE).

Students who have been through the CIE system hit the ground running wherever their
university destination. Another student puts it this way: ‘a student with the robust foundation
of A Levels is prepared to cope with the workload of university without having to make drastic
changes in their lifestyle. I feel ready to stride out into the world of university’. This student’s
confidence is backed up by the findings of a recent study done by the University of Florida
Director of Admissions who found that CIE graduates had an average end-of-freshman year
GPA of 3.46 whereas students coming from other national and international programmes had
a GPA of 3.12 and under at the end of the freshman year.

And to the final skill in empowering individuals – the skill of being able to work together, to
collaborate as part of a team. Too much of the educational process can be seen as being
involved with personal achievement. From the assessment perspective this is appropriate.
But there are many opportunities in the classroom for peer-to-peer learning and team-
working. The ends this achieves are not merely social, although these are, of course,
important. They are also educationally vital. To learn from our peers as well as from our
teachers increases the pace and opportunity for learning. The value of the internet is that it
democratises the learning process enabling us to build a network of information and expertise
which grows exponentially. Collaborative working on projects and investigations
demonstrates how much added value is contributed through teamwork and effectively
prepares individuals for the patterns of lifelong learning. The most interesting demonstration
of the way in which this can be translated into an assessment context is provided not in a
Cambridge syllabus but by one developed by the Ministry of Education in Singapore for which
Cambridge provides a quality assurance role. Project Work is a core, discrete part of the
Junior College curriculum and plays a significant role in admission to higher education.
Students work together on cross-curricular projects which are assessed both as individual
projects and as the work of the group. A core element of the assessment design is the
individual as a member of a group.

The Project Work syllabus is an excellent example of the way in which assessment design
can be developed to reflect new educational goals. It responds to two of the most central
educational debates of the twenty-first century. The first concerns the emphasis on ‘learning
skills’ that equip individuals to meet the demands of a transformed work environment; the
second on learning as a social construct.

The creativity, planning, research, analysis and evaluation which the Project Work written
report requires builds a strong set of skills for future learning and employability. An oral
presentation offers an opportunity for the development of communication and presentation
skills. The assessment model requires the student to be active in constructing his or her own
learning in a contextualised situation; the extended duration of the project work activity
enables the submission of a best performance. Beyond the acquisition of an individual’s
learning and skill, however, membership of the project group introduces elements of value-
based learning in which individuals must demonstrate sensitivity to others’ achievements of
their learning goals. This focus on the ‘individual as member of a social group’ recognises the
importance of learning as a social activity. Vygotskian models of cognition as a social
phenomenon add a particular dimension to constructivist views of knowledge-creation which
accord well with today’s networked world. From such a perspective the individual
construction of knowledge is enriched by the socio-cultural context, creating a human 'internet' of vital importance to the development of intellectual and social capital.

Further, the assessment design of the Project Work has taken care to emphasise integration of learning across subject domains. A project group may decide to look at a theme from very different perspectives – which may involve those of aesthetics, the physical and social sciences, literature and history. The individual’s understanding of one part of the whole is enriched by the perspectives introduced by his or her peer group and the quality of the learning subsequently enhanced.

The assessment design focuses not only on the quality of outcome but also on the process skills of production and collaboration. While the UK’s experience of performance or authentic assessments of this kind have tended to be beset by a great deal of mechanical documentation (Wolf, 1995), by contrast the assessment instruments and documentation in Project Work are economical and efficient. Students engage in project work well aware that their approach to the process of learning is of importance as well as the final task outcome.

Before concluding this session, it is essential to mention the role which ICT itself can play in the curriculum. It goes without saying that in today's economies, when more and more of us work in manufacturing knowledge, computer literacy is a key skill in education. In line with UK education in general Cambridge has been committed to introducing computer literacy into schools and has a set of flagship qualifications (CLAIT, CLAIT Plus, IT Skills), and partnerships with industry (Microsoft and CompTIA) that underpin this. It is also pushing boundaries in the way in which students’ IT skills can be encouraged and rewarded in the curriculum. Developments such as e-portfolios allow students to submit a more diverse range of evidence for assessment, computer-based testing allows us to introduce more flexible paradigms of student-readiness into the timetabling of examinations. The use of rich simulations in assessment enables us to provide for the more authentic assessment of skill and motivates and encourages students in their applicability to real-life situations. For example the ‘Bioscope’ – an online biological microscope simulation and a series of Geography fieldwork simulations on ‘Rivers,’ ‘Inner City’ and ‘Weather’ are used to provide realistic assessment of students’ practical skills.

Above all, to develop such skills in students we must empower teachers. Equipping teachers themselves with new skills in which the focus moves away from teaching as the core activity towards a focus on enabling students’ learning. ‘Managing learning’ describes this new skill-set very well and in CIE we have designed a number of strategies to support teachers around the world in making this paradigm shift. The provision of professional development materials, training events in every continent and specially targeted qualifications and certificates for teachers enables Cambridge to play our part in contributing to educational good practice as relevantly today as when we first started working in partnership with schools in 1858.

Conclusion

All those involved in higher education over the next two decades will witness a significant change in the diversity of the student body. Teaching strategies, cultural assumptions and values transmission will respond to this change and evolve new paradigms appropriate to the global economy in which higher education will be delivered. The role of those involved in preparing students for their higher education experience is vital if students are to be able to make the most of the opportunities afforded them.

The Cambridge perspective to the pre-university curriculum is that it should recognise the value of a sound and strong national identity for young learners. It should encourage and develop international awareness and a respect and understanding for the values and traditions of others. It should also ensure that students are able to participate in, and contribute to, the global economy. Cambridge’s international curriculum and assessments foster these skills and values and, when combined with a school ethos that works towards the same goals, provides a sound platform for students to move on into higher education in the destination of their choice.
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