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Preparing candidates for success in dissertation defenses: Practical guidance for masters and Ph.D. Students

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Abstract
This article synthesizes evidence-informed strategies to improve preparedness and performance of masters and doctoral candidates in final oral defenses, addressing both pre-defense preparation and in-defense practices. Drawing on self-efficacy theory and performance psychology, it argues that structured rehearsal, targeted skills-training (presentation design, scholarly argumentation, and question-handling), and supervisor-led formative feedback substantially reduce candidate anxiety and increase defense competence (Bandura, 1997; Ericsson, 2008). Institutional supports-clear assessment criteria, mandatory mock defenses, and accessible workshops-align expectations between candidates and examiners and lower procedural uncertainty, a known driver of stress (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). The article proposes a three-stage model: (1) Preparation Phase-planning timelines, iterative manuscript review, and simulated defenses with peer and supervisor feedback; (2) Rehearsal Phase-microteaching, Q&A drills, and cognitive techniques for emotion regulation; (3) Defense Phase-pragmatic in-exam strategies for framing responses, repairing argumentative gaps, and real-time stress management. Each stage includes concrete practices, templates for mock viva protocols, and supervisory checklists designed for equitable application across diverse candidate populations. Attention to equity highlights how culturally responsive preparation and transparent criteria mitigate disproportionate burdens on underrepresented students. The paper concludes with recommendations for embedding defense-readiness into graduate curricula, metrics for programme evaluation, and a research agenda to test the model's effectiveness across contexts.

Keywords: Defense preparation, supervision, mock viva, candidate self-efficacy, equitable assessment

1. Introduction
This article addresses the persistent challenge that masters and doctoral candidates face when preparing for and undertaking final oral dissertation defenses. Graduate oral examinations remain high-stakes, evaluative encounters that combine scholarly judgment with performative interaction, producing considerable candidate anxiety and uneven outcomes across cohorts. Empirical and theoretical work identifies uncertainty about expectations, gaps in candidate presentation and question-handling skills, and inconsistent supervisory practices as central drivers of defense-related stress and failure risk (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1]. A focused program of preparation that integrates skill development, structured rehearsal, and supervisory scaffolding therefore constitutes an essential institutional response.

1.1 Background and theoretical framing
Three complementary theoretical strands inform the practical model developed in this paper. Self-efficacy theory locates confidence and task-specific beliefs as primary determinants of performance under evaluative pressure; interventions that increase mastery experience and vicarious learning reliably raise performance and reduce anxiety (Bandura, 1997) [2]. Performance psychology and expertise research emphasise the role of deliberate, feedback-rich practice in converting domain knowledge into reliable, observable competence; targeted, repetitive rehearsal of oral presentation and question-response routines accelerates skill acquisition and stabilises performance under stress (Ericsson, 2008) [4]. Assessment and higher-education scholarship foregrounds structural sources of candidate uncertainty, showing that opaque criteria, uneven examiner expectations, and lack of formalised rehearsal opportunities amplify procedural anxiety and produce inequitable outcomes (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1]. Integrating these perspectives yields a practical, stage-based model that addresses cognitive, performative, and institutional determinants of defense readiness.

1.2 Problem statement
Many graduate programs leave defense preparation to ad hoc supervisory relationships and candidate initiative, producing variability in candidate readiness and amplifying inequities for students with limited prior exposure to high-stakes scholarly performance. The absence of standardised rehearsal protocols, explicit assessment rubrics, and in-exam coping strategies means that capable candidates sometimes underperform due to avoidable procedural and psychosocial factors. This problem is particularly acute in contexts where supervisory capacity is uneven and where students come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

1.3 Purpose, scope, and research aims
The purpose of this article is to synthesize evidence-informed, practicable strategies that supervisors, programmes, and candidates can deploy before and during the defense to improve outcomes and equity. The scope includes pre-defense planning (timeline management, manuscript iteration, and mock viva protocols), rehearsal practices grounded in deliberate practice principles, and in-exam tactics for framing responses and managing acute stress. The article aims to (a) map key drivers of defense-related underperformance, (b) propose a three-stage preparation model grounded in self-efficacy and deliberate practice, and (c) furnish supervisory checklists, mock viva templates, and evaluative metrics suitable for programme adoption.

1.4 Significance
Embedding structured defense preparation into graduate curricula addresses both individual-level performance risks and institutional equity obligations. Interventions that operationalise clear criteria, scaffold rehearsal, and cultivate candidate self-efficacy reduce avoidable failure, align examiner-candidate expectations, and create replicable pathways to defense readiness, thereby strengthening overall doctoral and masters assessment integrity (Bandura, 1997; Ericsson, 2008; Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [2, 4, 1].

1.5 Outline of the article
The next section reviews empirical literature on candidate stressors and supervision practices. This is followed by a detailed three-stage model with actionable protocols and templates, an implementation guide for programmes, and suggested metrics for evaluation. The article concludes with limitations and a research agenda to test the model across disciplinary and institutional contexts.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Candidate stressors and evaluative pressure
The final oral defense is a high-stakes evaluative event combining cognitive, social, and performative demands that exacerbate candidate stress and impair performance. Research identifies uncertainty about expectations, unclear assessment criteria, and inconsistent examiner behaviour as primary structural drivers of procedural anxiety, which in turn reduce the likelihood of competent performance during the viva (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1]. Psychological theory locates a candidate's appraisal of task demands and perceived control as central to stress response; lower perceived control and high ambiguity predict elevated anxiety and less effective problem-focused coping (Bandura, 1997) [2].

2.2 Self-efficacy and performance under pressure
Self-efficacy theory provides a direct explanatory pathway from preparation to in-exam performance. Mastery experiences, vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, and regulated arousal shape task-specific confidence; interventions that increase mastery through incremental successes and structured feedback reliably improve subsequent performance in evaluative settings (Bandura, 1997) [2]. For dissertation defenses, this implies that repeated, scaffolded rehearsal and authentic practice opportunities should enhance candidates' sense of preparedness and capacity to respond adaptively under scrutiny.

2.3 Deliberate practice and skill automatisation
Expertise and performance psychology emphasise the necessity of deliberate, feedback-rich practice to convert declarative knowledge into procedural fluency (Ericsson, 2008) [4]. Targeted drills-such as micro-presentations, focused Q&A simulations, and segmental rehearsal of key argumentative moves-promote automatization of core tasks (e.g., framing responses, signposting arguments), freeing cognitive resources for adaptive reasoning during the defense (Ericsson, 2008) [4]. Deliberate practice principles also require clear goals, immediate feedback, spaced repetition, and progressively challenging tasks, design features that inform mock viva protocols.

2.4 Supervisory practices and formative scaffolding
Supervisory behaviours strongly influence candidate readiness. Active coaching, structured feedback cycles, and explicit discussion of likely examiner concerns reduce uncertainty and create opportunities for mastery learning. Supervisors who provide templates for presentation structure, rehearse likely questioning trajectories, and arrange peer or panel mock vivas create vicarious learning environments and opportunities for corrective feedback, thereby strengthening candidate preparedness (Bandura, 1997; Ericsson, 2008) [2, 4]. Conversely, laissez-faire supervision magnifies variability in readiness and perpetuates inequities.

2.5 Institutional transparency and equity considerations
Assessment literature highlights that opaque procedures and inconsistent access to preparatory resources disproportionately disadvantage candidates from underrepresented or resource-poor backgrounds (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1]. Embedding standardized mock vivas, published rubrics, and institutionally provided skills workshops mitigates informational asymmetries and supports equitable defence readiness. Culturally responsive preparation-acknowledging linguistic diversity and differing rhetorical conventions-further reduces disproportionate burdens on marginalized students.

2.6 Synthesis and implications for the model
Empirical and theoretical strands converge on a practical implication: to improve defense outcomes institutions should operationalize a staged preparation model that integrates deliberate practice, supervisor-led formative feedback, and transparent assessment processes. The next section operationalizes these components into a three-stage preparation model with concrete protocols, templates, and supervisory checklists grounded in the evidence cited above

(Bandura, 1997; Ericsson, 2008; Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [2, 4, 1].

3. Three-stage preparation model

3.1 Preparation Phase: planning, alignment, and resource scaffolding

- **Define timeline and milestones:** Submission deadline, committee review windows, mock viva dates, and rehearsal schedule to allow iterative manuscript revision and feedback cycles (recommended minimum: three complete manuscript reviews with written feedback) (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1].
- **Clarify assessment criteria:** Provide candidates with written rubrics, exemplar viva transcripts or summaries, and typical examiner expectations to reduce ambiguity and procedural anxiety (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1].
- **Supervisor actions:** Co-create a defence readiness plan with the candidate, set explicit goals for each review, and document expected standards for presentation length, core claims, and methodological defence (Bandura, 1997) [2].
- **Equity measures:** Ensure access to institutional workshops, language support, and scheduled peer rehearsal for students lacking prior oral-exam experience; prioritize earlier scheduling for those with caregiving or work constraints to equalize preparation time (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1].

3.2 Rehearsal Phase: deliberate practice and formative simulation

- **Structure of mock vivas:** Run at least two staged simulations-one formative (peer + supervisor) and one summative (panel with external or simulated examiners)-using timed presentations, recorded sessions, and immediate debriefs (Ericsson, 2008) [4].
- **Deliberate-practice activities:** Micro-presentations (5-10 minute segments of thesis argument), focused Q&A drills on weakest chapters, and progressive complexity in questioning to build procedural fluency (Ericsson, 2008) [4].
- **Feedback design:** Use video review plus rubric-mapped feedback focused on content defense, argument signposting, response structure, and nonverbal presence; convert feedback into specific, measurable practice tasks for the candidate (Bandura, 1997) [2].
- **Psychological skills training:** Integrate short modules on breathing, cognitive reappraisal, and visualization to reduce arousal and foster task-focused attention immediately prior to defense (Bandura, 1997) [2].
- **Peer and vicarious learning:** Incorporate observation of exemplar defenses and peer critique sessions to provide vicarious mastery experiences and normalize examiner interaction styles (Bandura, 1997) [2].

3.3 Defense Phase: in-exam tactics and real-time regulation

- **Presentation tactics:** Open with a concise 3-5 minute roadmap of the thesis contribution and methodological rigour; use signposting phrases and explicit limits to focus examiner attention and reduce digression (Ericsson, 2008) [4].
- **Question-response protocol:** Adopt a three-part answering routine-(1) brief restatement of the question to buy processing time, (2) direct answer with evidence anchor, (3) concise bridge back to the thesis argument or offer to expand-reducing cognitive load and improving perceived competence (Bandura, 1997) [2].
- **Repair strategies:** Teach scripted phrasing for interrupted or challenging exchanges (e.g., "That's an interesting point; may I clarify the assumptions behind that section?") to maintain control and professional tone (Ericsson, 2008) [4].
- **Stress-management cues:** Short pre-response breath holds, micro-pauses, and use of notes for signposts only; supervisors should rehearse these micro-behaviours during mock vivas so they become automated under pressure (Bandura, 1997; Ericsson, 2008) [2, 4].
- **Supervisor presence and contingency:** Where institutional policy permits, supervisors may signal procedural clarifications post-question (but not answer questions) and provide rapid post-defense pastoral support to scaffold recovery and sense-making.

3.2 Tools, templates, and checklists

- **Candidate readiness checklist:** Manuscript status; three rounds of feedback; two recorded mock vivas; presentation slides reviewed; Q&A log with 50 practiced questions; psychological-skills brief completed.
- **Mock viva protocol template:** Roles (chair, examiners, observer), timing, question bank, rubric mapping, recording consent, debrief form with action points.
- **Supervisor checklist:** Timeline milestones, feedback delivery deadlines, confirmation of equity supports, arrangement of panel mock viva, and post-defense follow-up meeting.

3.3 Implementation and evaluation metrics

- **Short-term metrics:** Number of mock vivas completed, change in candidate self-efficacy scores pre/post intervention, and examiner-rated presentation competence (Bandura, 1997) [2].
- **Medium-term metrics:** Defense outcome (pass/conditional/rework), time-to-completion, and candidate-reported fairness and preparedness.
- **Long-term metrics:** Programme-level trends in defence attrition, demographic equity indicators, and examiner consistency measures derived from rubric inter-rater reliability (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; Ericsson, 2008) [1, 4].
- **Continuous improvement:** Use routine programme-level data to refine rubrics, diversify exemplar materials, and scale skills workshops where metrics show persistent gaps.

3.4 Closing rationale for the model

This staged approach translates theoretical mechanisms-self-efficacy enhancement through mastery and vicarious learning, skill automatization via deliberate practice, and uncertainty reduction through transparency-into concrete, evaluable practices that supervisors and programmes can implement to improve candidate readiness and equity in dissertation defenses (Bandura, 1997; Ericsson, 2008; Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [2, 4, 1].

4. Implementation and Institutional Adoption

4.1 Institutional commitment and governance

Secure formal endorsement from graduate school leadership to embed defense-readiness across programmes through policy amendment, resource allocation, and clear accountability for implementation (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1]. Establish a small steering group-graduate dean, senior supervisor representative, student representative, and a learning-skills specialist-to draft policy, approve templates, and monitor rollout (Bandura, 1997) [2].

4.2 Resourcing and staffing

- Skills workshops and mock viva panels require trained facilitators (senior supervisors or learning-centre staff), administrative coordination, and room/recording infrastructure; allocate a modest budget line for facilitator stipends and recording equipment (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1].
- Invest in upskilling supervisors through short training modules on formative feedback, mock viva design, and equity-aware coaching; these modules should model deliberate-practice cycles and feedback specificity (Ericsson, 2008) [4].
- Provide student-facing materials: readiness checklists, Q&A banks, exemplar viva transcripts, and short psychological-skills modules; host these on the graduate school intranet for equitable access (Bandura, 1997) [2].

4.3 Programme-level workflow and timeline

1. Intake (12-6 months pre-defense): candidate and supervisor co-create a defense-readiness plan with milestones for manuscript drafts, feedback rounds, and scheduled mock vivas (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1].
2. Rehearsal (3-6 months pre-defense): run the first formative mock viva (peer + supervisor); assign deliberate-practice tasks based on videoed performance and rubric-coded feedback (Ericsson, 2008) [4].
3. Consolidation (1-4 weeks pre-defense): summative mock viva with an external panel or senior faculty; complete psychological-skills brief and final checklist items (Bandura, 1997) [2].
4. Defense Day: candidate follows in-exam protocols and post-defense debrief is scheduled within 72 hours for feedback and pastoral support (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1].

4.4 Supervisor and examiner roles

- **Supervisors:** Co-author readiness plan, schedule and participate in mock vivas, provide scaffolded, rubric-linked feedback, and ensure candidate access to supports (Bandura, 1997) [2].
- **Examiners (for mock vivas):** Use standardized rubrics reflecting institutional criteria to provide realistic questioning and consistent formative evidence (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1].
- **Learning-centre staff:** Deliver psychological-skills training and coach on presentation mechanics informed by deliberate-practice pedagogy (Ericsson, 2008) [4].

4.5 Equity safeguards

Mandate at least one funded mock viva per candidate; prioritise early scheduling and additional language or rhetorical coaching for candidates from under-resourced backgrounds. Monitor participation and outcomes disaggregated by gender, nationality, and first-language to detect and address disparities (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1].

4.6 Monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement

- Process indicators: Percentage of candidates with documented readiness plans, number of mock vivas completed, supervisor training uptake.
- Outcome indicators: Pre/post self-efficacy scores, examiner-rated presentation competence, defense outcomes, time-to-degree, and inter-rater reliability on rubrics (Bandura, 1997; Ericsson, 2008) [2, 4].
- Use quarterly programme reviews to triangulate quantitative metrics with qualitative feedback from candidates and examiners and iterate templates, rubrics, and training accordingly (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1].

4.7 Anticipated challenges and mitigation

- **Resistance from faculty who view mock vivas as encroaching on assessment independence:** Mitigate with clear distinction between formative mock panels and summative examination, and by publishing governance that preserves examiner autonomy (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1].
- **Resource constraints:** Phase implementation starting with high-risk cohorts and scale as metrics justify further investment (Bandura, 1997) [2].
- **Cultural mismatch in rehearsal formats:** Adapt mock viva scripts and feedback language to local rhetorical conventions and include culturally responsive coaching (Ericsson, 2008) [4].

4.8 Summary of adoption steps

1. Secure leadership mandate and form steering group (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1].
2. Develop templates, rubrics, and training modules aligned with deliberate-practice principles (Ericsson, 2008) [4].
3. Pilot with one department, collect mixed-methods evaluation data, and refine before scaling (Bandura, 1997) [2].

5. Evaluation Limitations and Research Agenda

5.1 Evaluation framework for programme effectiveness

Implement a mixed-methods evaluation combining pre/post measures of candidate self-efficacy, rubric-coded examiner ratings of presentation and response quality, and qualitative interviews with candidates, supervisors, and examiners. Use validated self-efficacy scales adapted to oral examination tasks and triangulate with behavioral indicators such as number of mock vivas completed and time-to-degree completion. Report effect sizes for quantitative changes and thematic saturation for qualitative findings to support claimsabout programme impact (Bandura, 1997; Ericsson, 2008) [2, 4].

5.2 Short-term evaluation metrics and data collection

Collect candidate self-efficacy scores before the Rehearsal Phase and immediately after the Consolidation Phase, alongside examiner rubric scores from summative mock vivas and the actual defense. Supplement with immediate post-defense interviews exploring perceived fairness, clarity of expectations, and usefulness of rehearsal activities.

Analyze pre/post differences using paired-sample tests and report confidence intervals to indicate precision (Bandura, 1997; Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [2, 1].

5.3 Medium-and long-term outcomes to monitor

Track defense outcomes (pass, pass with minor corrections, major revisions, fail), time from submission to successful completion, and attrition rates across cohorts. Disaggregate outcomes by demographic variables (gender, nationality, first language, socio-economic status) to evaluate equity effects. Assess inter-rater reliability of examiner rubrics over time using intraclass correlation coefficients to detect improvements in assessment consistency linked to transparency measures (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1].

5.4 Research questions and hypotheses for empirical testing

1. **Does structured mock viva participation improve candidate self-efficacy and examiner-rated performance compared with standard ad hoc preparation? Hypothesis:** Candidates who complete staged mock vivas will show larger pre/post self-efficacy gains and higher rubric scores than controls (Bandura, 1997; Ericsson, 2008) [2, 4].
2. **Which deliberate-practice components (video feedback, micro-drills, Q&A banks) produce the largest improvements in in-exam response coherence? Hypothesis:** Feedback modalities that combine video review with rubric-linked action points will yield superior gains in response structure and signposting (Ericsson, 2008) [4].
3. **Do transparency interventions (published rubrics, exemplar vivas) reduce demographic disparities in defense outcomes? Hypothesis:** Programs that adopt transparency safeguards will show reduced gaps in pass rates and perceived procedural fairness for underrepresented groups (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1].

5.5 Recommended study designs and sampling strategies

Use cluster-randomized trials where departments or academic units are randomized to implement the staged preparation model or continue usual practice to control for contamination within supervisory relationships. Complement trials with longitudinal cohort studies to observe long-term effects on time-to-degree and career outcomes. Employ purposive sampling for qualitative follow-up to capture experiences of historically marginalized candidates and examine contextual moderators such as disciplinary norms and institutional resources (Bandura, 1997; Ericsson, 2008; Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [2, 4, 1].

5.6 Methodological caveats and validity threats

Anticipate selection bias if more motivated candidates opt into enhanced preparation; mitigate with intention-to-treat analyses and baseline covariate adjustment. Address observer effects in recorded mock vivas by standardizing recording procedures and ensuring rater blinding where feasible. Recognize that cultural and disciplinary differences in viva conventions limit external validity; report contextual details explicitly to aid transferability (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1].

5.7 Implementation research and scaling considerations

Conduct formative implementation studies to identify resource bottlenecks, supervisor workload impacts, and cultural adaptations needed for local contexts. Use Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles to iteratively refine templates, training modules, and rubrics prior to large-scale rollout. Evaluate cost-effectiveness by comparing resource investment per candidate with reductions in reworks, extended candidature, and attrition (Ericsson, 2008; Bandura, 1997) [4, 2].

5.8 Concluding research priorities

Prioritize rigorous trials of the staged preparation model, comparative studies of feedback modalities, and equity-focused evaluations that measure both outcomes and mechanisms. Generate open-access repositories of exemplar rubrics, mock viva scripts, and validated evaluation instruments to accelerate cross-institutional learning and cumulative evidence building (Bandura, 1997; Ericsson, 2008; Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [2, 4, 1].

6. Conclusion and practical recommendations

This article presents a three-stage, evidence-informed model to prepare masters and PhD candidates for dissertation defenses by combining deliberate-practice rehearsal, supervisor-led formative scaffolding, and institutional transparency. The model targets cognitive, performative, and procedural sources of underperformance by increasing mastery experiences, providing vicarious learning opportunities, and reducing uncertainty about assessment expectations (Bandura, 1997; Ericsson, 2008; Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [2, 4, 1]. Implementation requires modest resourcing, targeted supervisor development, and programme-level governance but promises measurable gains in candidate self-efficacy, examiner-rated competence, and equitable defense outcomes.

6.1 Key practical recommendations

- **Adopt staged readiness plans:** Require a documented defense-readiness plan co-authored by candidate and supervisor with milestones for manuscript revisions, two recorded mock vivas, and a final checklist (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1].
- **Standardize formative rehearsal:** Mandate at least one formative mock viva (peer + supervisor) and one summative mock viva (panel with external or senior faculty) using rubric-mapped feedback and video review to enable deliberate-practice cycles (Ericsson, 2008) [4].
- **Publish assessment rubrics and exemplars:** Make rubrics, exemplar vivas, and common question banks openly available to reduce procedural ambiguity and level access across cohorts (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1].
- **Train supervisors and facilitators:** Provide short modules on specific feedback techniques, mock viva facilitation, and culturally responsive coaching to ensure consistent, actionable formative support (Bandura, 1997; Ericsson, 2008) [2, 4].
- **Provide psychological-skills support:** Integrate brief, skills-based sessions on breathing, cognitive reappraisal, and visualization into consolidation activities to help candidates regulate arousal on defense day (Bandura, 1997) [2].
- **Embed equity safeguards:** Fund at least one mock viva per candidate, prioritise early scheduling and language/rhetorical support for those from under-

resourced backgrounds, and monitor outcomes by demographic variables (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1].

6.2 Implementation checklist for programmes

1. Secure leadership mandate and form a steering group to approve templates and monitor rollout (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1].
2. Develop rubrics, mock viva templates, and a candidate readiness checklist aligned with deliberate-practice principles (Ericsson, 2008) [4].
3. Pilot the model in one department, collect mixed-methods evaluation data (self-efficacy, rubric scores, qualitative interviews), and refine materials (Bandura, 1997) [2].
4. Scale with phased resource allocation, continuous monitoring of participation and equity indicators, and quarterly iteration cycles informed by programme data (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [1].

6.3 Final note on expected impact and next steps

When implemented with fidelity, the staged preparation model should increase candidates' preparedness and confidence, reduce preventable defense failures, and improve equity in high-stakes oral assessment. Priority next steps are rigorous evaluation using mixed-methods designs, open sharing of validated templates and rubrics, and coordinated supervisor training to sustain programme effects across cohorts (Bandura, 1997; Ericsson, 2008; Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) [2, 4, 1].

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