



Gender-Based Perceptions of Postgraduate Defense Sessions and Seminar Feedback at the University of Zambia - A Quantitative Perspective

Kenneth Kapalu Muzata

Department of Educational Psychology, Sociology and Special Education, University of Zambia, Zambia.

*muzatakenneth@gmail.com

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Abstract

This quantitative study investigates postgraduate students' perceptions of feedback received during seminar presentations and defense sessions at the University of Zambia. Drawing on a self-selection sample of 75 master's and doctoral candidates across various faculties, the research examined the quality, tone, and impact of feedback on students' academic development. Quantitative analysis revealed generally high levels of satisfaction with feedback across key research components, including proposal writing, literature review, methodology, and data analysis. Notably, feedback on methodology approached statistical significance as a concern, and perceptions of external examiners varied significantly by gender. While lecturers and examiners were identified as the most helpful sources of feedback, lecturers were also cited as the most frequent source of demeaning comments, highlighting a tension between authority and emotional safety in academic critique. Anchored in a social constructivist framework, the study emphasizes the relational nature of feedback and its role in shaping academic identity. The findings underscore the need for more empathetic, structured, and inclusive feedback practices to enhance postgraduate research quality and student well-being.

Keywords: Academic supervision; gender perceptions; postgraduate feedback; seminar presentations; social constructivism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The University of Zambia (UNZA) is the oldest and highest leading university in Zambia. Opened in 1966, the University offers a wide range of postgraduate programmes across its various schools, including Postgraduate Diplomas, Master's Degrees, and Doctoral Degrees. Programmes are designed to foster research, innovation, and professional development in Zambia and beyond. The table 1 shows some of the masters and doctoral programs offered in the University. Postgraduate education culminates in rigorous academic activities such as defense sessions and seminars. These platforms are designed to foster scholarly dialogue, provide constructive feedback, and assess students' research competencies.



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Table 1. Table of sample postgraduate programs at UNZA

School/Faculty	Masters Programmes	PhD Programmes
Agricultural Sciences	- MSc in Agricultural Economics. Agronomy (Plant Science / Crops). Animal Genetics. Animal Nutrition. Integrated Soil Fertility Management. Sustainable Land & Environmental Management and Plant Breeding & Seed Systems	- PhD in Animal Nutrition, Animal Breeding. Animal Genetics. Reproductive Physiology. Aquaculture. Entomology. Food Science & Technology. Human Nutrition. Soil Science. Plant Science and; in Soil Microbiology
Education	- M.Ed. in Adult Education. Civic Education, Curriculum Studies; Educational Psychology, Administration & Management. Environmental Education; Guidance & Counselling. Literacy & Linguistics. Mathematics Education (Taught & Research); Primary, Religious, Science, Special, Sociology of Education and in Library & Information Science	- PhD in Adult Education; Applied Linguistics, Civic Education; Curriculum Studies, Educational Psychology; Administration & Management; Environmental Education; Guidance & Counselling, Language & Literacy; Library & Information Science; Mathematics, Primary, Religious, Science, Special, and in Sociology of Education
Humanities & Social Sci.	- MA in History, Philosophy, Literature, Linguistics, Psychology, Sociology, Development Studies and in Gender Studies	- PhD in History, Philosophy, Literature, Linguistics, Psychology, Sociology, Development Studies and in Gender Studies
Law	-LLM in Commercial Law, Human Rights Law, and in Environmental Law	- PhD in Law
Health Sciences	- MSc in Public Health, Clinical Sciences and in Biomedical Sciences	- PhD in Public Health, Biomedical Sciences
Medicine	- Master of Medicine (various specialties) and in Clinical Pharmacology	- Medical Sciences
Natural Sciences	- MSc in Chemistry, Physics, Biology and in Mathematics	- PhD in Chemistry, Physics, Biology, Mathematics
Nursing Sciences	- MSc in Nursing Education	in Nursing
Public Health	- MSc in Midwifery	
Veterinary Medicine	- Master of Public Health (MPH)	- PhD in Public Health
Graduate School of Business	- MSc in Veterinary Public Health and in Animal Health	- PhD in Veterinary Sciences
	MSc in Accounting & Finance, Project Management and in Marketing	- PhD in Business Administration and in Finance

Note: The list is not exhaustive because there are programs at masters and PhD level aswell in the faculty of Engineering.

The importance of feedback in postgraduate education cannot be overemphasized. The significance of feedback in postgraduate education has been documented in research works such as those of Brookfield and Hounsell (Brookfield, 2017; Hounsell, 2007). It's possible that gender can affect the way we perceive feedback especially in academic and different cultural settings. Gender dynamics in

academic settings have also been widely studied, with findings suggesting that women may experience feedback differently due to implicit biases (Boring, 2017). However, few studies have examined these dynamics in the context of postgraduate defense sessions and seminars in African universities. Feedback plays a pivotal role in postgraduate education, particularly in shaping research quality, academic writing, and student development. The manner in which feedback is provided also matters and influences student satisfaction and their participation in research works. Chugh et al. (2022) emphasize that feedback is a socio-cultural construct that evolves throughout a student's research journey. Their review of 43 global studies highlights that effective feedback enhances both student and supervisor capabilities, while poor feedback leads to negative supervisory experiences. Cekiso et al. (2019) and others found that inadequate, untimely, and non-critical feedback is a recurring issue, often hindering student progress and satisfaction. Although this study concentrated on the nature and quality of immediate feedback when students are presenting their work for comments that lead to building up quality research works, feedback should be used as a building tool to the student rather than as a demotivating instrument. Seminars and defense sessions are critical junctures for feedback delivery, offering students opportunities to engage with critiques and refine their work. Lovat et al. (2022) explore the role of oral defense in doctoral development. Their study across 11 Australian universities found that many supervisors and graduate directors preferred pre-completion seminars over post-submission vivas. These seminars allow students to reflect on feedback and integrate it into their final thesis, promoting learner agency and formative assessment. Uthman & Oduselu (2023) analyze feedback from post-field defense sessions, identifying common themes such as structural, methodological, and presentation critiques. Their findings underscore the importance of clarity, precision, and adherence to academic standards, suggesting that feedback at this stage is crucial for thesis refinement and publication readiness.

However, some studies in Zambia have revealed challenges among postgraduate students as they undertake their studies. A study by Manchishi et al. (2018) on challenges faced by postgraduate distance students in research proposal writing did not address gender related perceptions or challenges but uncovered challenges faced by postgraduate distance education students at the University of Zambia (UNZA) including, lack of research skills and knowledge where students were reported to have difficulties with proposal writing, often choosing topics that are too broad or unclear, and failing to identify gaps in existing literature. Although the study was specifically on challenges, some of the variables such as proposal writing, help in writing literature have been covered as areas student perceptions were assessed in this study. Other challenges the paper revealed included time and resource constraints and insufficient supervision. On insufficient supervision, the study reported students having limited and infrequent engagement with their supervisors, leading to feelings of isolation and long waits for feedback.

The other study by Manchishi et al. (2015) focused on Common Mistakes Committed and Challenges Faced in Research Proposal Writing by University of Zambia Postgraduate Students. Through this study, we can read between lines and derive possible perceptions, although not by gender since this study was qualitative. According to Manchishi et al. (2015), students frequently made errors in Proposal writing where they failed to clearly state the problem, do not identify a gap in the literature, use the wrong methodology, misunderstand research terminology, and use incorrect referencing styles. Plagiarism is also mentioned as a common mistake. Further, supervision challenges were noted where the supervisor-student relationship was not good leading to a lack of adequate support from lecturers, contributing to the students' difficulties. With the paucity of studies directly on perceptions, a gap worth exploring was identified so that students' perceptions and how they vary by gender can be understood especially in the Zambian academic contexts.

The study was placed within a theoretical lens guided by Social Constructivism theory, positing that learning and knowledge are inherently and socially constructed through interaction (Vygotsky, 1978).

Postgraduate students tend to benefit from dialogue, feedback, and collaborative critique in shaping student understanding and research competence. Using the theory, this paper contends that feedback should be understood as Dialogue. In this sense, defense sessions and seminars are not just evaluative—they are interactive spaces where students negotiate meaning and refine ideas through social engagement. Further, feedback should be conducted with consideration within gendered experiences where social constructivism allows for the exploration of how gender influences these interactions, acknowledging that perceptions are shaped by cultural norms and interpersonal dynamics. It is also important to consider feedback within the roles of supervisor and examiner. Thus, the theory highlights the importance of more knowledgeable others (lecturers, examiners) in scaffolding student learning, making it ideal for analyzing feedback quality and delivery. Finally, feedback is related to emotional and cognitive Development. It accommodates the affective dimension of learning, including how demeaning comments or supportive feedback influence student motivation and identity.

By applying social constructivism, the study can move beyond surface-level satisfaction metrics to explore how feedback practices shape the academic journey of postgraduate students in nuanced and culturally embedded ways. Postgraduate seminars and defense sessions are intended to support academic growth; anecdotal evidence suggests that students may experience them differently based on gender. However, there may be differences in perceptions based on gender differences that have not been explored, yet understanding these differences is crucial for promoting equity and improving postgraduate support systems. This study was conducted to assess gender differences in perception towards feedback received during postgraduate seminar and defense sessions. The study answered two key questions namely; (1) What are postgraduate students' perceptions of defense sessions and seminar feedback? (2) Is there significant gender-based differences in perceptions between male and female postgraduate students?

2. METHODS

The study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey of 75 postgraduate students; (41 male, 34 female) selected by self-selection strategy where a link was distributed through google forms. The aim was to obtain a general overview of the perceptions students have on the quality of feedback received during seminars and defense sessions. A structured questionnaire with Likert-scale and categorical items was prepared and administered via google forms distributed to student e-learning platforms and emails. Although students were encouraged to participate, they had a choice not to and hence, a voluntary or selection strategy was appropriate until the desired sample for generalization was arrived at upon decline in responses. The aim in quantitative research is representativeness for generalization purposes (Mwansa, et al., 2022). The sample of 75 respondents used in this study only met a generalizable principle but did not entail that the results are generalizable to all postgraduate students who have completed and are still in the university from 10 years ago.

The questionnaire included items on demographic information such as gender, level of postgraduate studies pursued, age, status of studies whether completed or ongoing, mode of study, faculty the students belonged to, and the position they held at work while studying. Each of the demographic information was critical for analysis in the manner that they were treated during their studies. Other information accessed included assessing their satisfaction levels during presentations with regard to time, and comments received from audience, lecturers and examiners. Questions were asked to assess their satisfaction levels rated as agree, strongly agree, disagree, strongly disagree or neutral of various components of the research process. Responses were coded in SPSS and correlated against selected variables specifically against gender to obtain the study mission of whether gender had a bearing on the

perceptions postgraduate students had towards how they are supported during seminars, and defense sessions.

Data were coded in SPSS version 19 and descriptives and cross tabulations obtained and analysed using the Chi-square tests for independence, whose significance threshold set at $p < 0.05$. In this study, the Chi square test was appropriate between both variables measured were categorical (Pallant, 2020).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Postgraduate Students' Perceptions of Defense Sessions and Seminar Feedback analysed by Gender

Perceptions of Presentations by Gender

The study results revealed a positive outlook of perceptions of the presentations and time allocated for presentations in seminars and defense sessions. The results did not show significant differences in gender on presentation ($p = .371$) and on time adequacy ($p = .810$); an indication of satisfaction for both genders that the presentations were helpful and conducted within required time given. Tables 1 and 2 show the results.

Table 2. Whether presentations were helpful or not

		I found presentations very helpful					
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Gender	Male	2	1	4	16	18	41
P= .371	Female	1	2	8	14	9	34
Total		3	3	12	30	27	75

Table 2 shows that most postgraduate students were generally satisfied that the presentations were very helpful in their postgraduate studies. The results agree with Sudarsana, & Luwih (2022) who found the level of satisfaction about postgraduate services to be satisfactory. However, the difference is that Sudarsana, & Luwih (2022) focused on general postgraduate services as opposed to what this study specifically focused on research seminars and defense feedback. The result presents a positive perception for healthy postgraduate support.

Table 3. Whether time for presentations was adequate or not

		Time for presentations was adequate			
		Adequate	Short	Not inclusive	Total
Gender	Male	28	12	1	41
P=.810	Female	21	12	1	34
Total		49	24	2	75

The study revealed that postgraduate students at the University of Zambia generally perceive seminar presentations and defense sessions positively, with no significant gender differences in satisfaction levels. Similarly, a study by Joseph, & Natarajan (2022) showed student satisfaction in terms of time and engagement when presenting using powerpoint. This aligns with the literature by Brookfield (2017) and Hounsell (2007), who emphasize the importance of feedback in fostering academic growth

and reflective learning. The lack of gender disparity in presentation perceptions suggests that, at least in terms of structure and time allocation, the university has achieved a degree of equity in academic delivery.

However, the literature also cautions that feedback is not merely procedural-it is deeply socio-cultural (Chugh et al., 2022). While students reported satisfaction, the nuances of how feedback is internalized may still differ subtly across gender lines, especially in contexts where implicit biases are present (Boring, 2017). The absence of significant differences in most feedback categories may reflect a shared academic culture, but it does not rule out the possibility of deeper, qualitative differences in emotional or cognitive responses to feedback.

There is however a specific point to note though not supported by adequacy of data that the presentation time was not inclusive. It is worth noting that students with disabilities also enroll in the postgraduate programmes and the need to be flexible in terms of time and the nature of feedback becomes cardinal for an inclusive education system. Muzata (2021) emphasises the need for institutions to adhere to positive and practicable inclusive practices at all levels of education. Though not supported by adequate quantitative data, as noted by Muzata (2020), qualitative researchers should take keen interest into how postgraduate seminars and defense sessions benefit students with disabilities.

Perceptions on Feedback on Proposal, Title, Problem Statement, Framework, Literature Review, Methodology, Instruments, Analysis, Findings, and References by Gender

Student perceptions on specific portions of the research process were assessed to determine whether there were parts they found feedback poor as opposed to others that may have had quality feedback, thereby informing student strengths in some portions while others may need help. The results showed that all the specific parts had p- values above .05 demonstrating no significant differences in gender perceptions and generally showing satisfaction with feedback received on the various parts. Table four shows the different aspects of the research process assessed and the results:

Table 4. Student perceptions on help received on different sections of the methodology

	Characteristic	Gender	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
1	I am happy with help I received on proposal feedback P= .236	Male	4	1	2	18	16	41
		Female	0	2	1	21	10	34
		Totals	4	3	3	39	26	75
2	I am happy with help I received on coming up with title P = .888	Male	0	2	6	18	15	41
		Female	1	1	4	17	11	34
		Totals	1	3	10	35	26	75
3	I am happy with help I received on statement of the problem P = .785	Male	1	1	8	20	11	41
		Female	3	1	5	18	7	34
		Totals	4	2	13	38	18	75

4	I am happy with help I received on theory or conceptual framework	Male	1	3	9	21	7	41
		Female	3	4	4	16	7	34
		Totals	4	7	13	37	14	75
5	I am happy with help I received on literature review P = .603	Male	1	2	4	22	12	41
		Female	3	2	6	15	8	34
		Totals	4	4	10	37	20	75
6	I am happy with help I received on methodology p=.063	Male	1	1	1	26	12	41
		Female	3	3	3	11	14	34
		Totals	4	4	4	37	26	75
7	I am happy with help I received on instruments P =.465	Male	2	3	6	20	10	41
		Female	4	0	5	15	10	34
		Totals	6	3	11	35	20	75
8	Happy with help on analysis p=.923	Male	2	3	8	19	9	41
		Female	3	2	7	13	9	34
		Totals	5	5	15	32	18	75
9	Happy with help on writing findings chapter P= .603	Male	2	1	8	22	8	41
		Female	3	2	9	12	8	34
		Totals	5	3	17	34	16	75
10	Happy with help on writing references P = .508	Male	2	2	8	18	11	41
		Female	1	4	11	12	6	34
		Totals	3	6	19	30	17	75

Students expressed general satisfaction with feedback across various research components—proposal writing, title formulation, problem statement, literature review, methodology, instruments, analysis, findings, and references. These findings contrast with earlier studies by Manchishi et al. (2015; 2018), which highlighted widespread challenges in proposal writing and supervision. The discrepancy may be due to improvements in supervisory practices or the structured nature of seminar feedback, which offers more immediate and diverse input compared to one-on-one supervision.

Interestingly, feedback on methodology approached statistical significance ($p = .063$), suggesting that this area may still be a pain point for students. This echoes Cekiso et al. (2019), who found that methodological guidance is often inadequate, leading to confusion and poor research design. The relatively high satisfaction in other areas may reflect institutional efforts to standardize feedback practices during seminars and defenses.

Source of Helpful Comments according to Gender

Respondents were further asked to state what they considered the best sources of feedback during seminars and defense sessions. They were required to choose from fellow students, lecturers, examiners, and the audience in general. Results showed no significant differences ($p = .543$), greater than .050. Lecturers and examiners were most frequently cited sources of quality feedback when students made presentations. Table 5 shows the results.

Table 5. What students considered as helpful sources of feedback

		I received more helping comments from						
		No response	Fellow students	Lecturers	Examiners	Audience in general	All	Total
Gender	Male	2	2	9	21	7	0	41
p = .543),	Female	1	4	11	13	4	1	34
Total		3	6	20	34	11	1	75

Lecturers and examiners were cited as the most helpful sources of feedback, yet paradoxically, lecturers were also the most frequently cited source of demeaning comments. That lecturers are considered helpful, reinforces their pivotal role in shaping postgraduate learning. They are naturally mentors and have a role to shape the future of the students, a responsibility bestowed by their description. Like in other studies such as the study by Hadjieconomou & Tombs (2021), postgraduate students value feedback that is specific, actionable, and tied to assessment criteria, particularly when delivered by authoritative figures. Lecturers own the academic authority to guide and provide feedback to students. Their expertise lends credibility, making their comments more impactful than those from peers or general audiences. This duality underscores the complex nature of academic authority—while lecturers are central to knowledge dissemination, their feedback style may sometimes lack sensitivity. This finding resonates with Uthman & Oduselu (2023), who emphasize the importance of clarity and constructive critique in post-field defenses.

However, the once the authority is abused, lecturers feedback to students becomes meaningless. This happens when feedback is poorly delivered. Williams (2024) notes that feedback in higher education often oscillates between constructive critique and discouraging commentary, depending on the lecturer's communication style. Darwent & Musgrove (2023) further argue that feedback reflects power dynamics yet students may feel disempowered when feedback emphasizes deficiencies without guidance for improvement, a finding that appears to resonate with this study where some students, felt the feedback was not satisfactory or demeaning. From the results, it is clear that students who felt demeaned became demotivated in their studies, although further in-depth research is required to fill this gap in knowledge.

The absence of significant gender differences ($p = .543$) suggests that both male and female students perceive lecturers and examiners in the same way, similar with Clifton & Simpson (2015) study, which observed that perceptions of feedback quality are more strongly influenced by feedback style and clarity than by student demographics. Thus, institutional emphasis should be placed on improving delivery rather than tailoring feedback differently by gender.

Demeaning Comments compared by Gender

Apparently when asked whether there were demeaning comments on students work during seminar and defense sessions, while students felt there were no demeaning comments generally, lecturers were the

most cited source of demeaning comments. There were no significant differences by gender ($p = .311$). The table 6 below shows the results.

Table 6. What students considered as sources of demeaning feedback

		I received demeaning comments from					
		Fellow students	Lecturers	Examiners	Audience in general	None	Total
Gender	Male	2	10	9	5	15	41
	Female	1	8	2	4	19	34
Total		3	18	11	9	34	75

The literature suggests that feedback should be formative and empowering (Lovat et al., 2022), yet the presence of demeaning comments indicates a need for training in feedback delivery. Gender did not significantly influence perceptions of demeaning comments, but the emotional impact of such feedback may still vary by gender, as suggested by Boring (2017). The paradox underscores the need for training lecturers and examiners in feedback literacy. Effective feedback should balance rigor with sensitivity, ensuring that critique fosters growth rather than discouragement. Brookhart's review (2023) emphasizes that high-quality feedback must be timely, specific, and framed constructively, avoiding language that undermines student confidence.

Comparing male and Female students' perceptions on internal and external examiners

Respondents were asked on how they perceive feedback from internal examiners compared with external examiners. The results showed significant gender differences at $P=.007 < .05$.

Table 7. Student perceptions on help received from internal and external examiners

		During my study I found external examiners more helpful than internal examiners						
		0	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Gender P=.007	Male	1	2	6	18	13	1	41
	Female	0	2	11	20	1	0	34
Total		1	4	17	38	14	1	75

The only statistically significant gender difference emerged in perceptions of external examiners ($p = .007$), with male students finding them more helpful than internal examiners, while female students leaned more neutral. This could reflect differences in perceived authority, objectivity, or communication style. External examiners may be viewed as more impartial, which could influence how their feedback is received across gender lines. This finding opens a new avenue for exploring examiner-student dynamics and their impact on academic development. Students need to enjoy positive relationships with their mentors in order to appreciate their role in their studies positively. Young & Petrescu (2025) observed that students valued the relationships they had with supervisors and were highly satisfied. Although this study did not focus on supervisory feedback, a link exists that student satisfaction is crucial to their success especially when they enjoy cordial relationships and receive timely feedback. Beyond this, with respect to the Zambian culture where men and women are treated differently during their development, the need for respectful feedback is crucial to avoid misunderstanding that gender is being

used to disadvantage some students of a certain gender, especially female, during their postgraduate studies. This is not to say a certain should be treated in a special way compared to the other, but that feedback comments given to students should be respectful and building rather than demeaning and belittling, aspects that are against the Zambian culture.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored the perceptions of postgraduate students regarding feedback received during seminar presentations and defense sessions. The findings reveal a generally positive outlook among students, with high levels of satisfaction across most research components. Notably, feedback on methodology emerged as a potential area of concern, and external examiners were perceived differently across gender lines.

The dual role of lecturers-as both helpful and occasionally demeaning-highlights the complexity of academic feedback dynamics. While students value constructive critique, the emotional tone and delivery of feedback significantly influence their academic confidence and engagement. These insights affirm the importance of fostering a feedback culture that is not only rigorous but also empathetic and inclusive. While gender differences are a focus of this study, other differences need to be considered when students are given the opportunity for presentation during seminars and defense sessions. The low numbers that considered presentation time not adequate as well as the other variables demonstrate individual differences which should be considered as students are mentored. Variations in student individualities include being natural slow speakers, disability, timidity resulting from lack of public speaking skills and internet connection challenges and ICT skill inadequacy.

It is imperative that seminars and defense sessions become as inclusive as possible to allow for quality satisfactory feedback. By situating the findings within a social constructivist framework, the study underscores the relational and dialogic nature of learning. Feedback is not merely a transmission of information; it is a co-constructed process that shapes students' academic identities and research trajectories. In the light of the results, the following recommendations would help address the concerns from this study.

First, there is need for the University to enhance feedback training for academic staff by conducting workshops on effective feedback delivery, emphasizing clarity, empathy, and constructive critique and including modules on unconscious bias and gender-sensitive communication to reduce instances of demeaning comments.

Second, the Institution can consider working on standardized feedback protocols where institutional guidelines for feedback can be developed for and during seminars and defenses to ensure consistency and fairness. It would further be useful to encourage use of structured rubrics that cover all research components, especially methodology.

Third, there is need for the institution to strengthen methodological support through offering targeted seminars or clinics focused on research design and methodology, especially for early-stage postgraduate students and pairing students with methodological mentors or peer reviewers to provide additional layers of support.

The results also show the need to leverage External Examiners strategically. The institution should continue involving external examiners to provide diverse perspectives, but ensure their feedback is contextualized and communicated effectively. The need to explore student perceptions further to understand gendered responses to external feedback and adjust practices accordingly would be helpful to the practice of feedback provision.

Lastly, it's prudent to create safe feedback spaces via establishing post-defense debrief sessions where students can reflect on feedback and seek clarification in a non-threatening environment. It would also be cardinal to introduce anonymous feedback channels for students to report concerns about feedback tone or delivery. This study is one revelation of feedback giving readers students' feelings about how they molded.

In all, further research, especially qualitative follow-up studies would help to explore emotional and cognitive responses to feedback across gender and academic disciplines and to investigate long-term impacts of feedback on thesis quality, completion rates, and academic self-efficacy.

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