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Academic and Administrative Audit (AAA) in Indian Higher Education: A Multi-Stakeholder Assessment of Quality Assurance, Institutional Impact, and Implementation Challenges in Pune HEIs

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Abstract

This paper presents a quantitative analysis of the Academic and Administrative Audit (AAA) system conducted in 40 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) located in Pune, India, drawing upon primary data collected from 1104 stakeholders, including teaching staff, students, and administrative personnel. The research establishes that while HEIs in the region demonstrate structural maturity through high rates of compliance and strong academic quality assurance processes, this efficacy is simultaneously undermined by pervasive organizational friction. Key findings indicate a strong endorsement of AAA for its ability to enhance strategic planning and core academic delivery, achieving high reported implementation rates. However, this procedural success exists in tension with critical failures in non-academic support services (e.g., washroom maintenance, canteen hygiene), which receive significant stakeholder dissatisfaction. The study identifies staff resistance , lack of funds , and structural bureaucracy as the primary systemic barriers to achieving a robust, sustainable quality culture. The paper concludes by arguing that for AAA to transition from a mandatory compliance mechanism to a genuine driver of institutional transformation, policy revisions must mandate targeted investment in infrastructure and staff welfare, coupled with a deliberate shift toward decentralized, participatory administrative governance.

1. Introduction and Contextualization of Quality Assurance

1.1. The Evolving Regulatory Landscape of Indian Higher Education

The higher education system in India, one of the world's largest and most complex, has increasingly focused on institutional quality assurance mechanisms over the past three decades. Recognizing the imperative to maintain high standards and ensure accountability in the field of higher education, both the central government and state authorities have mandated rigorous evaluation processes. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), established by the University Grants Commission (UGC), serves as the apex body responsible for assessing and accrediting HEIs nationwide.

A vital component of this quality assurance framework is the Academic and Administrative Audit (AAA). The AAA system functions as a mechanism for controlling and maintaining high standards by offering a continuous process of self-introspection for the better growth of the institution. Its benefits are documented to include ensuring a heightened level of clarity and focus in institutional functioning, internalizing a quality culture, and providing a sound basis for decision-making aimed at improving institutional operations.[5] The adoption of AAA signifies an international trend, as developing countries increasingly move toward systematic quality management strategies.

1.2. Problem Statement: AAA as a Catalyst vs. Compliance Mechanism

While the objectives of AAA are centered on promoting quality enhancement, a fundamental academic debate exists regarding the inherent dichotomy of quality assurance systems. These external auditing processes may, in practice, impose conformity and regulatory control (a "hard" compliance model) rather than genuinely supporting

cultural change, innovation, and self-improvement (a "soft" quality culture). Experience suggests that mandatory evaluation often shifts organizational focus toward documentation and procedural adherence to satisfy external requirements.[8]

This research aims to critically examine the operation of the AAA framework within HEIs in Pune city. By analyzing the perceptions of key stakeholders—teaching staff responsible for core academic processes, administrative staff handling institutional support, and students as the end-users of educational services—the study seeks to determine the position of these institutions on the compliance-culture spectrum. Specifically, the analysis evaluates whether the administrative efforts are translating into substantive, holistic quality enhancement, or whether the process remains a largely symbolic exercise driven by mandatory requirements.

1.3. Research Objectives and Scope

The primary objectives of this research paper are structured as follows:

1. To establish the demographic context and operational structure of the surveyed HEIs in Pune, including funding, accreditation status, and workforce composition.
2. To quantify and compare the multi-stakeholder perceptions regarding the procedures, value, and overall effectiveness of the AAA process.
3. To assess the perceived impact of AAA preparation and implementation on various institutional functions, including curriculum, teaching-learning methodologies, and administrative efficiency.
4. To identify and categorize the key organizational and resource-based challenges that impede the effective implementation of quality assurance recommendations.

2. Theoretical Framework: Compliance, Culture, and Effectiveness of Quality Audits

2.1. Defining Academic and Administrative Audit (AAA)

Academic and Administrative Audit is fundamentally understood as a mechanism to control and maintain high standards in higher education. The institutional vision, operations, and processes should reflect a sustained focus on quality enhancement, quality sustenance, and quality initiatives.[7] For HEIs in India, this task is often assigned to the NAAC, which mandates evaluation based on the past and present contributions of the institution against a fixed scale.[4]

The documented benefits of effective AAA implementation include ensuring enhanced coordination among various institutional activities, providing a platform to institutionalize all good practices, and acting as a dynamic system for quality changes. The process encourages self-evaluation, accountability, autonomy, and innovation. The subsequent analysis will utilize stakeholder feedback to assess how successfully HEIs are moving toward these aspirational objectives.

2.2. The Dichotomy of Quality Assurance

The efficacy of quality assurance mechanisms hinges on the development of a genuine "quality culture." This culture is defined as belonging to the people within the institution, rooted in their values and attitudes, rather than merely reflecting mission statements or strategic documents. However, quality assurance systems, particularly those that are risk-based or mandatory, face the inherent risk of driving institutional cultures toward conformity, control, and compliance.

The data analysis will test this dichotomy by examining stakeholder agreement on two conflicting perspectives:

first, the view that AAA is a compliance tool (a metric of external control); and second, the view that AAA facilitates substantive quality improvement (a metric of internalized culture). The goal is to determine if the HEIs have successfully moved toward a system that enables mentoring and internal improvement rather than just external monitoring.

2.3. Indicators of Institutional Effectiveness

Institutional effectiveness in the context of AAA is evidenced by verifiable facts and figures about institutional functioning, particularly focusing on how quality initiatives are sustained and enhanced. The data collected across the three respondent groups provides indicators in three key domains: academic effectiveness (teaching, curriculum), administrative efficiency (policy review, planning), and infrastructural/support service quality (facilities, welfare). The analysis will test whether procedural improvements (e.g., documentation systems, academic planning) translate directly into improved service quality as perceived by students and staff (e.g., welfare measures, washroom maintenance).

3. Demographic Mapping of the Pune Higher Education Ecosystem

The study sample is drawn from 40 Arts, Commerce, and Science colleges in Pune city. The collective perceptions of the 1104 respondents provide a robust cross-section of the region's higher education landscape.

3.1. Profile of Surveyed Institutions (N=40): Evidence of Quality Commitment

The institutional profile reveals significant characteristics regarding financial structure, accreditation status, and commitment to quality. Funding and Status

The colleges surveyed show a preference for external financial support, with 60% classified as Aided Colleges and 40% as Unaided Colleges. This majority reliance on aided status suggests that institutional operations are significantly influenced by public financial frameworks and resource allocations. Furthermore, only 27.5% of the institutions hold Autonomous status, indicating that the majority operate within a more traditional, affiliated university environment.

Accreditation Landscape and Quality Standard

The commitment to quality compliance in Pune is high, with 85% (34 out of 40) of the surveyed colleges holding NAAC accreditation. This high rate reflects a strong regional response to the mandatory quality assessment framework.

Analysis of the NAAC grades reveals that 37.5% of institutions received high grades (15% A+ and 22.5% A), indicating successful attainment of quality benchmarks. Conversely, 22.5% were graded B, suggesting substantive room for improvement in quality standards, and 15% were not accredited (NA). The presence of colleges across the quality spectrum ensures the findings reflect the diverse performance landscape of the regional HEI ecosystem.

3.2. Composition and Structure of Respondent Sample (N=1104)

The total respondent base comprises 1104 individuals, carefully distributed to ensure representation of the academic community: 48.55% students (N=536), 30.25% teaching staff (N=334), and 21.20% administrative staff (N=234).[1] The high proportion of students ensures that the evaluation of educational delivery and support services is strongly grounded in end-user perception.

Table 1: Consolidated Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents (N=1104)

Stakeholder Group	Total N	Percentage (%)
Students	536	48.55%
Teaching Staff	334	30.25%
Administrative Staff	234	21.20%

3.3. Detailed Demographic Analysis of Teaching Staff (N=334)

The teaching staff exhibits clear demographic trends suggestive of a workforce geared primarily for instructional stability. The majority of faculty (66.46%) are aged 40 to 49 years, indicating a strong concentration of middle-aged individuals. Furthermore, a significant gender disparity exists, with females comprising 75.44% of the teaching staff, suggesting that the academic community in this region is predominantly female-led.[1]

Regarding professional roles, the faculty structure is highly hierarchical, dominated by Assistant Professors (75.75%). A large majority hold Master's degrees (53.89%), followed by Net/Set qualifications (37.12%) Critically, only 8.99% of the teaching staff possess a Ph.D. This profile indicates that the workforce is optimized for instructional delivery and stability. However, the relatively low percentage of doctoral degree holders suggests that while teaching quality may be prioritized, performance metrics related to research productivity could pose a significant challenge during comprehensive quality audits. This suggests that the HEI system structure may currently prioritize instructional effectiveness over advanced research output, possibly reflecting resource constraints or institutional mission focus.

3.4. Detailed Demographic Analysis of Administrative Staff (N=234)

The administrative staff shows a polarized experience profile, suggesting potential internal knowledge gaps. The workforce is mature, with 72.21% of staff aged between 31 and 50 years. Work experience is strongly dichotomized, with a significant cohort possessing less than 6 years of experience (36.32%) and an equally large group having over 15 years of service (34.61%).

The organizational structure is top-heavy at the base, with Junior Staff comprising the majority (63.24%). This co-existence of a large veteran staff cohort (with institutional memory) and a substantial new staff cohort (requiring training) creates a delicate organizational environment. The administrative system depends heavily on the veteran staff for procedural knowledge and documentation adherence, while new staff must navigate potentially entrenched bureaucratic practices. This inherent structural gap foreshadows the later-reported difficulties in decentralization, knowledge transfer, and resistance to change.

4. Stakeholder Perceptions of the AAA Framework and Process

The analysis of teaching staff perceptions concerning the modalities, purpose, and procedures of AAA reveals a highly conscious, yet skeptical, engagement with the quality assurance system.

4.1. Awareness and Preferred Modality of AAA Conduct

Faculty members demonstrate varying levels of awareness regarding the conduct of the audit process. While a substantial 84.64% of respondents believe AAA is primarily conducted by an Internal peer team, a significant portion (51.35%) simultaneously strongly agrees or agrees that AAA *should* be conducted by an External team.

This difference between perceived practice (internal audit) and preference (external audit) reveals a critical credibility gap. Faculty preference for external team involvement suggests an inherent scepticism regarding the impartiality or rigor of purely internal assessments. The strong reliance on internal peer teams, as currently practiced, implies that AAA often functions as a structured preparation exercise for mandated external audits (like NAAC) rather than a truly independent, culturally embedded audit. This places greater institutional pressure on the effectiveness and impartiality of the Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC).

4.2. Perceived Purpose and Value of AAA

Faculty generally acknowledge the value of the AAA process despite its demands. A substantial majority (81.68% strongly agree or agree) view AAA as worthwhile, even though they perceive it as time-consuming.[1] Furthermore, 57.94% agree that the process is expensive, confirming the perception of a significant resource burden imposed on institutions.

The research confirms the existence of the compliance-culture dichotomy in stakeholder perception. While 75.28% of faculty agree that AAA genuinely enhances the quality of HEIs, a notable majority (61.38%) also concur that the process is *more towards compliance* rather than quality improvement.[1] This simultaneous agreement suggests that compliance is viewed as the primary motivation for engagement, even if these mandatory efforts inadvertently yield positive, tangible improvements in institutional quality.

4.3. Procedural Aspects and Transparency

The data highlights a strong professional expectation for consistent and transparent quality assurance practices. A significant majority of faculty (81.32% strongly agree or agree) believe the IQAC should conduct internal AAA annually. This strong support for continuous, frequent internal auditing underscores a desire among the academic community for sustained quality assurance efforts beyond the periodicity of external audits.

Procedurally, there is high confidence in the rigor of the external process: 86.83% agree that the AAA team physically visits the organization, and 85.20% confirm that documentary evidence is verified. Furthermore, faculty strongly emphasize the necessity of actionable outcomes; 79.85% express the need for a plan to be developed to implement the observations generated by the AAA process, demonstrating an expectation that audit findings must translate directly into strategic actions. This strong professional emphasis on structured implementation reflects a cultural aspiration toward continuous improvement, even if the primary driver remains compliance.

5. AAA Impact on Institutional Processes and Quality Initiatives (Faculty Perspective)

The teaching staff perceives a high positive correlation between engagement with the AAA framework and quantifiable improvements across core institutional operations.

5.1. Impact on Core Academic Functions

The process of preparing for and undergoing AAA is consistently linked to improvements in the core academic functions of the HEIs. Overwhelming consensus exists for perceived improvements in three key areas: Curriculum

Design and Planning (87.72% strongly agree or agree), Teaching and Learning (89.82% SA/A), and Examinations (88.59% SA/A).

This suggests that the rigorous self-study and systematic documentation required for AAA act as a powerful catalyst for internal reflection and subsequent process optimization. The need to systematically review operations and document evidence of effectiveness validates the self-evaluation component of quality assurance as a strategic tool for generating internal improvements, regardless of the ultimate external outcome. The emphasis on pedagogical support, such as encouraging faculty to enroll for Faculty Development Programs (FDPs) (90.11% SA/A) and motivation for research activities (91.08% SA/A), further supports this notion of targeted academic refinement driven by audit requirements.

5.2. Effectiveness of Strategic Planning and Policy Implementation

Faculty agreement on strategic planning and policy execution is exceptionally high, indicating successful organizational alignment following audit focus. Strong adherence is reported across procedural mechanisms: Effective Planning Process (88.02% SA/A), adherence to the Academic Calendar (87.90% SA/A), and the presence of well-defined college policies (88.02% SA/A).

The data confirms a robust documentation culture, which is essential for audit compliance: 88.32% agree that a documentation policy is in place, and 87.13% confirm the timely submission of the Annual Quality Assurance Report (AQAR). The high levels of agreement on linking activities toward the achievement of the institutional Vision and Mission (89.17% SA/A) suggest that the audit process successfully mandates and verifies organizational clarity and goal alignment.

5.3. Reported Rate of Implementation of Audit Suggestions

A key finding concerning the effectiveness of the AAA process is the high reported rate of implementation of audit suggestions among teaching staff. A substantial majority of teaching staff (53.00%) report implementation rates between 75% and 99%. Furthermore, a remarkable 92.22% of respondents report implementation rates above 50% (30.24% reporting 50-74%, 8.98% reporting 100%).

This high procedural compliance rate suggests that HEI leadership and the internal quality mechanisms are effective at enforcing compliance on measurable, visible, and process-oriented tasks (e.g., documenting policies, updating curriculum). However, this successful enforcement must be analyzed alongside the significant challenges reported in Section 7. The implementation success appears to be driven by procedural mandate and rigorous follow-up, rather than organic cultural adoption, hinting at underlying organizational friction that the mandate overrides.

6. Service Quality and Operational Efficiency: Student and Administrative Staff Perspectives

While teaching staff report high success in procedural implementation, evaluations from students and administrative staff on institutional service quality and operational efficiency expose significant organizational weaknesses, revealing a critical quality paradox.

6.1. Student Quality Indicators: Academic Performance

Student feedback confirms the high quality of core academic delivery established by the faculty data. Students exhibit near-universal satisfaction with the fundamental academic experience: 93.99% strongly agree or agree that teachers possess adequate subject knowledge, 93.30% affirm effective teacher communication, and 91.60% agree that lectures are conducted regularly.[1] The integration of technology is also largely successful, with 72.69%

reporting satisfaction with teachers' use of ICT tools (e.g., MS PowerPoint, LMS).

Furthermore, the HEIs appear effective at developing key competencies. Students report high proficiency acquisition in soft skills, with 88.79% satisfied with their Communication Skills development and 84.90% with their Decision-making skills. This strong performance in academic delivery and skill development underscores the HEIs' capability to meet core educational objectives.

6.2. The Quality Paradox: Non-Academic Support Services

In stark contrast to the exemplary academic ratings, student satisfaction plummets drastically regarding non-academic support services, exposing a critical institutional blind spot. Basic facilities receive widespread dissatisfaction:

- **Adequate and Clean Washrooms:** Only 65.70% of students agree or strongly agree that each floor has an adequate number of well-maintained and clean washrooms. Conversely, 27.05% disagree or strongly disagree.[1]
- **Hygienic and Nutritious Canteen Food:** Only 45.49% agree or strongly agree regarding the hygiene and nutrition offered by the college canteen. A substantial 31.04% disagree or strongly disagree, compounded by high neutrality (23.88%).[1]

The extreme disparity between high academic quality (e.g., 93.99% satisfaction with teaching) and low facility quality (e.g., 54.51% neutral/dissatisfied with canteen services) suggests a failure in resource allocation and strategic prioritization. While resources and efforts are successfully channelled toward measurable NAAC academic criteria, there is systemic neglect of environmental quality and student well-being . This service quality failure can profoundly impact the overall student experience, potentially nullifying the gains achieved through academic excellence.

6.3. Administrative Staff Evaluation of Operational Efficiency

The administrative staff's evaluation of internal operations highlights both structural strengths and managerial rigidities. Efficiency is deemed strong in formalized, auditable structures: 91.88% strongly agree or agree that the institution has well-laid policies and processes, 89.74% agree regarding Office Automation, and 85.47% confirm effective Documentation.[1] The positive agreement on the Well-laid Grievance Redressal Mechanism (82.47% SA/A) suggests confidence in addressing formal concerns.

However, efficiency ratings drop noticeably in areas requiring cultural change and participatory management: only 75.21% agree or strongly agree on the effectiveness of Decentralisation of work, and only 67.95% agree on the effective conduct and maintenance of records for Staff Meetings. The lower rating for decentralization and staff participation indicates centralized control and poor horizontal communication. This administrative structure, while robust for formal policy adherence, creates the very bureaucratic environment later identified as a major implementation barrier.

7. Analysis of Institutional Welfare and Key Implementation Barriers

The data reveals that the primary obstacles to sustained quality enhancement are not procedural but organizational and financial, characterized by a persistent dissatisfaction with staff support mechanisms and high internal friction.

7.1. Adequacy of Welfare Measures for Staff

The perception of staff welfare is strongly bifurcated between basic workplace conditions and resource-intensive tangible benefits. Both teaching and administrative staff report high satisfaction with fundamental working environments, such as Good Working Conditions (90.71% SA/A for Teaching Staff; 84.61% SA/A for Administrative Staff) and clean amenities (Administrative Staff satisfaction with Clean Drinking Water/Washrooms exceeds 88% SA/A).[1]

Conversely, satisfaction is significantly lower for benefits requiring high financial resource allocation:

- Teaching staff agreement is noticeably lower for Medical Bills Reimbursed (56.89% SA/A) and Financial Support (63.32% SA/A).
- Administrative staff express mixed responses regarding Health Check-ups (67.52% SA/A) and Fee Concessions (65.81% SA/A).

This persistent gap in financial and tangible welfare measures suggests that budgetary constraints, potentially exacerbated by the heavy reliance on external funding (60% Aided Colleges), prevent the HEIs from comprehensively meeting staff expectations and improving morale.

7.2. Critical Challenges Hindering Quality Initiative Implementation

Despite the high reported rates of procedural compliance (Section 5.3), the teaching staff identifies severe organizational challenges that impede cultural quality adoption. The primary barriers cited are organizational friction, financial strain, and administrative rigidity:

- **Staff Resistance:** 54.79% strongly agree or agree that Staff Resistance is a major challenge during implementation of quality initiatives.[1]
- **Lack of Funds:** 47.90% identify Lack of Funds as a key barrier.[1]
- **Bureaucracy:** 45.81% cite Bureaucracy as a hindrance.[1]

This triad of challenges is highly interconnected. The organizational friction is compounded by financial constraints. The agreement on the high cost of AAA (57.94% agreement) coupled with the reported Lack of Funds (47.90%) suggests that HEIs are often unable to allocate necessary capital to address resource-intensive recommendations, such as facility upgrades or welfare benefits. When these tangible issues remain unaddressed, it creates frustration among staff (7.1), which manifests as Staff Resistance (7.2) to further audit-mandated change, regardless of the perceived value of AAA.

Furthermore, the rigidity inherent in the administrative structure—evidenced by the low support for Decentralization of Work (6.4)fuels the challenge of Bureaucracy. The centralized administrative system, while excellent at formal documentation, struggles to execute agile, culturally sensitive changes required for continuous improvement, thus reinforcing the perception that AAA is a top-down, compliance-driven exercise achieved despite, rather than through, cultural buy-in.

8. Discussion and Policy Implications

8.1. The Paradox of Compliance Maturity and Service Quality Failure

The data presents a clear and critical dichotomy: the HEIs studied possess high procedural maturity but exhibit a failure in holistic quality assurance. They excel in core academic functions, strategic documentation, and the timely implementation of audit suggestions (evidenced by 87%+ agreement on academic processes and 92%

implementation success).[1] This suggests that the current AAA/NAAC framework has successfully imposed a minimum standard of academic excellence and verifiable systematic functioning.

However, the simultaneous, steep decline in student satisfaction with basic institutional facilities the quality paradox underscores a strategic neglect of Criterion VII (Institutional Values and Best Practices). This neglect is likely due to institutional efforts prioritizing easily measurable and high-stakes academic criteria (Teaching, Curriculum, Research) over resource-intensive, yet crucial, environmental and service quality components (canteen, maintenance, welfare). The HEIs are functioning optimally for audit passage but failing in the daily delivery of holistic service quality, damaging the overall institutional reputation despite the quality of teaching.

8.2. Institutional Friction as the Primary Barrier to Sustainable Quality Culture

The analysis confirms that the primary impediment to transitioning AAA from a compliance mechanism to a genuine quality culture catalyst is organizational friction. The interconnected problems of staff resistance, bureaucracy, and lack of funds prevent continuous, internally motivated improvement.

The bureaucratic structure, evidenced by the administrative staff's low support for decentralization and heavy reliance on formal policies, creates an environment where change must be mandated and enforced rather than embraced. The high implementation rate is achieved *despite* this friction, not because the culture supports it. As long as the HEI structure remains centralized and lacks the resources to address basic welfare gaps, the high cost and time commitment of AAA will continue to breed resistance, ultimately hindering the HEIs' long-term capacity for true self-evaluation and sustained change.

8.3. Policy Recommendations for Regulators and HEI Leadership

To ensure that the Academic and Administrative Audit system fosters institutional transformation beyond mere compliance, the following policy adjustments are recommended:

Targeted Funding and Resource Allocation

Regulators should introduce specific, transparent funding streams or grants directly tied to addressing low-scoring non-academic support areas identified by student and staff feedback (Canteen Hygiene, Washroom Maintenance, Medical Reimbursement). Given the perceived Lack of Funds (47.90% agreement) and high cost of AAA, mitigating these resource gaps is crucial to reducing staff resistance and demonstrating a commitment to holistic quality assurance.

Refining Quality Audit Templates

Future audit frameworks must increase the proportional weighting of student service quality and institutional welfare to ensure they are non-negotiable elements for high accreditation scores. More sensitization is required to make the AAA process truly participative, focusing evaluation on the processes of decentralized policy review, stakeholder engagement, and cultural adoption, rather than solely on the creation of documentation.[8]

Cultivating Participatory and Decentralized Management

HEI leadership must proactively address the challenge of Bureaucracy by instituting mandatory requirements for the decentralization of minor decision-making and enhancing the frequency and effectiveness of staff meetings. Transforming the administrative ethos from rigid control to agile, participatory management will enhance administrative efficiency, reduce friction, and enable the swift execution of quality initiatives that currently stall

due to centralized bureaucratic hurdles. This cultural shift is necessary to ensure that academic excellence is matched by an exemplary supportive environment.

9. Conclusion

The present analysis of HEIs in Pune city underscores a pivotal stage in the maturation of quality assurance processes in Indian higher education. The findings confirm that the Academic and Administrative Audit has successfully mandated systematic procedures, documentation, and a high level of academic delivery, positioning the institutions for strong compliance. However, this systemic success is shadowed by fundamental organizational weaknesses: a chronic lack of funding that impacts resource-intensive welfare and infrastructural provisions, and administrative structures that prioritize control over decentralization and participation.

Ultimately, the research demonstrates that the HEI system suffers from an organizational maturity gap where structural compliance is high, but cultural buy-in and holistic service quality are deficient. To realize AAA's full potential as a dynamic force for quality culture, regulatory and institutional leaders must implement integrated strategies that prioritize stakeholder well-being, strategic resource investment in neglected facilities, and a definitive move towards decentralized administrative governance. Only by resolving this internal friction can HEIs successfully bridge the gap between procedural compliance and sustained institutional transformation.

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