Shifting roles and approaches: government coordination of post-secondary education in Canada, 1995–2006

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This paper analyses changing approaches to system-level governance in Canadian post-secondary education from 1995–2006. A review of major policy initiatives reveals a shift in provincial and federal government roles in and approaches to the coordination of post-secondary education. The federal government has strategically invested in post-secondary education, increasing its direct and indirect support for research and development and, at the same time, retreating from other areas of support. Provincial governments have expanded post-secondary systems and increased institutional diversity and the role of the market in post-secondary education while simultaneously developing more mechanisms of coordination.

Introduction

This paper is about the changing role of the state in post-secondary education in Canada. Our objective is to provide a critical analysis of changes to system-level governance in Canadian post-secondary education during the past decade (1995–2006). We do this by examining major government policy initiatives and highlighting policies that signal a departure in the state's relationship with post-secondary education. We begin by providing an overview of policy changes at the federal and provincial levels of authority. We conclude with observations on the developments, dynamics and pressures that have emerged in the governance of Canadian post-secondary education.

The federal context

Canada is a federal constitutional monarchy and a parliamentary democracy. The country is made up of ten partially self-governing provinces and three autonomous

territories. Governing power is shared between the provincial and federal levels of government. The constitution outlines the division of powers between the provincial and federal governments. Section 93 of the Constitution Act, 1867 specifically gives the provincial legislatures the exclusive power to make laws in relation to education. Consequently, the provinces have the direct and central role in developing legislation, regulating and coordinating post-secondary education, as well as providing operating support to post-secondary institutions.

The federal government has no direct role in shaping or coordinating post-secondary education, and Canada is the only industrialized country without a federal office or department of education. In the absence of a central government agency, there is no clear mechanism for national policy development.

As a consequence of the constitutional division of powers, historically, in Canada, education systems have developed within each province independently of one another, with each provincial government shaping its own education system to meet the needs of its region. Different arrangements have evolved in each province and territory for the coordination and regulation of post-secondary education.

The changing role of the federal government

Although the federal government has no direct role in coordinating or regulating post-secondary education, it has a powerful role in other areas of state governance that intersect with post-secondary education. Under section 91 of the Constitution Act 1867, the federal government has jurisdiction over national defence, Indian affairs, national security (including crime and prisons), external affairs, economic development, the territories and any other areas of national interest. All of these areas intersect with post-secondary education. For example, the government of Canada operates a military college, supports educational programming in Canadian prisons, funds international scholarship programs, and operates a number of programs and initiatives designed to address the need for further education of Canada's aboriginal peoples, including support for First Nations University of Canada. While the participation rates of Canada's aboriginal populations have been increasing, they are still dramatically lower than the Canadian average (Holmes, 2006), and Canada's overall record in aboriginal policy issues has been abysmal.

While the federal government is involved in a wide range of policy areas that intersect with post-secondary education, recent changes in the role of the federal government are particularly evident in four policy areas: federal-provincial transfers, skills development, research and development, and student financial assistance.

Federal-provincial transfers

The federal government makes transfer payments to the provinces to support post-secondary education. These transfer arrangements involve cash transfers, tax point transfers, and equalization payments to the poorer provinces. These transfer arrangements have been modified over time, but they were significantly reformed

under the Chretien Liberal government. As part of a broader strategy to reduce the federal deficit, the new government's 1995 budget drastically reduced financial transfers to the provinces for health, education and welfare. The provinces lost \$14 billion. At the same time, the government created a new mechanism to transfer the funds called the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST), in place from 1996/97 to 2004/05. This program aimed at further reducing the federal government's spending and the provinces lost another \$6 billion (Fisher *et al.*, 2005, p. 48). Finally, in an effort to provide greater accountability and transparency for federal health funding, the CHST was split in April 2004 into the Canada Health Transfer (CHT) and the Canada Social Transfer (CST) covering post-secondary education and welfare. Health receives 62% of the transfer funds, while post-secondary education and welfare share the remaining 38% of the transfer.

A number of provinces were already reducing their funding to post-secondary education amid a recession, and most provinces responded to the dramatic cuts in transfer payments by simply further reducing post-secondary education spending and, in some provinces, increasing or deregulating tuition fees. When reductions in the portion of the transfer going to post-secondary education are calculated against student enrolment, it has been estimated that per student funding during the period 1994/95 to 2004/05 decreased by almost 50% (Fisher *et al.*, 2005). In the context of deficit reduction, the federal government essentially decreased its role in providing operating support for post-secondary education by unilaterally modifying its transfer arrangements, and many provincial governments responded by asking institutions to make financial cuts and allowing institutions to increase tuition fees.

Skills development

The federal government has had a long history of involvement in labour market skills training and development programs and services in colleges, government institutions and the workplace. Beginning in the mid-1980s the federal government shifted away from supporting labour market training programs in community colleges and government facilities and moved towards supporting private industry, voluntary sector and employer-sponsored skills training under the Canadian Job Strategy (CJS). This shift represented a privatization of training provision, away from public community colleges and government centres. Beginning in the mid-1990s, much of the responsibility and funding for training devolved to the provinces and territories through negotiated Labour Market and Development Agreements (LMDAs) between the two levels of government. The federal government retained its responsibility for labour mobility across Canada, and continues to fund national youth, Aboriginal, persons with disabilities, at-risk youth, immigrants, apprenticeship and literacy programs (Fisher *et al.*, 2005).

Changes in the mechanisms for the funding and delivery of skills development programming have increased the presence and influence of the private sector in this area, arguably devolving to the private sector the power to shape labour market training. The federal retreat from this area has allowed regional industry groups to

take a more active role in fashioning their own training policy programs that meet the needs of their catchment area.

Research and development

The federal government has long been the major source of funding for university research and development, but when the federal deficit turned into a federal surplus, significant new investments were directed towards a range of initiatives as component parts of the government's new 'innovation' strategy (Wolfe, 2002). The federal government has expanded funding to the three traditional granting councils¹ that support investigator-initiated research programs selected on the basis of peer review. In 1999 the government reorganized the Medical Research Council (MRC) into the multi-disciplinary Canadian Institute of Health Research (CIHR) and doubled its funding.

The federal government also expanded the National Centres for Excellence program that had emerged in 1989 under the prior Conservative government's science policy. These applied and strategic science networks link researchers across the country in virtual networks and are funded by both the public and private sector. Their mandate is to turn university research into marketable technologies and increase Canadian global competitiveness in a knowledge-based economy. In 1997 the Liberal government expanded the program, with a focus on addressing the research needs of the private sector, increasing knowledge transfer, and advancing the government's economic and applied science agenda. By 2001/01, there were 29 networks that had been funded (Fisher *et al.*, 2005).

In addition to expanding existing programs, the federal government made substantive investments in entirely new initiatives. In 1997 it created the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI), an independent public foundation to fund research infrastructure through partnerships with the private and voluntary sectors, as well as with provincial governments. Aimed at supporting the research infrastructure needs of universities, colleges, hospitals and other not-for-profit institutions, the Canadian Foundation provides partial matching support in order to leverage private-sector and provincial government contributions. This has become the major source of financial support for research infrastructure in Canadian higher education.

The federal government also created the Canada Research Chairs (CRC) program, an initiative designed to create eventually 2,000 government-supported research chairs in Canadian universities. This phased program of direct government investment in human resources has focused on the creation of new tier 1 (senior) and tier 2 (junior) chairs, allocated to universities on the basis of past success in research council competitions. Some chairs are internal university appointments designed to provide status and retain major Canadian scholars, while others are external and designed to attract leading world scholars. For the first time, institutions were required to develop and submit an institutional research plan in order to obtain support under the CRC program. Preference has been given to health and natural and

applied sciences, which dominate the chairs (and only 20% have been awarded to women).

Other new initiatives have included the creation of the Canada Learning Council in 2004, and the substantive expansion of the Canadian Graduate Scholarships program in 2003, but perhaps the most symbolically important initiative has been the federal government's agreement, after decades of lobbying from the sector, to provide some support for the overhead or indirect costs associated with research funded by the federal government. From the outset, the federal granting councils had only provided support for the direct costs of research, and institutions essentially subsidized indirect costs through operating grant support. Some one-time-only support for indirect costs was provided in 2001, and in 2003 the government established the Indirect Costs Program with the objective of eventually providing 40% overhead support for research. Ironically the program has been phased so that institutions with modest levels of research activity currently receive a higher percentage of overhead support than the most research-intensive universities.

Student financial assistance

The federal government has played an important role in student financial assistance since the creation of the Canada Student Loan Program (CSLP) in 1964. The Program is operated in collaboration with and administered by the provinces through provincial student assistance offices, and its basic structure remained largely unchanged since its inception until 1994, except for changes in the amount of assistance available and the conditions of repayment.

In 1994 the program was overhauled and a new Canada Student Financial Assistance Act was passed. This legislation increased loan limits for both full-time and part-time students; increased maximum loan levels; changed payment provisions; created a new Special Opportunity Grant for students with disabilities, needy and part-time students, and women in doctoral programs; changed assessment mechanisms; and created new mechanisms for financing student loans through the private sector (Meloshe, 1994).

By the late 1990s, the rising levels of tuition in several provinces were beginning to raise difficult national political issues concerning the adequacy of Canada's student financial assistance mechanisms and the increasing level of student debt loads. In 1998 the federal government took steps to provide additional support for specific groups, such as students with disabilities and part-time students with high financial needs, through the Canadian Opportunities Strategy, and encourage families to save for their children's post-secondary education through a registered education savings program (RESP). Interest on RESP contributions is not taxed, and the government provides a top-up Canada Education Savings Grant of 20% (up to \$400) on annual contributions. These funds can only be used to support the costs of post-secondary education.

The federal government also created the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation (CMSF), a private non-profit entity, and provided the Foundation with a

substantive endowment. Its ten-year mandate is to provide needs-based student grants and some merit-based scholarships. The Foundation is now a major source of student grants in a student financial system dominated by federal and provincial loan programs.

Finally, the federal government has, rather enigmatically, increased the level of tax credits associated with tuition, books and student maintenance costs. The creation of an expanded, universal tax credit program has been very expensive, and a number of policy analysts have noted that the universal nature of the program is regressive. The fact that individual benefits are obtained long after the initial expenditure does little to encourage participation in post-secondary education (Neill, 2006).

Retreats in some areas and advances in others characterize shifts in the federal government's role in post-secondary education. Change in fiscal arrangements (federal-provincial transfer payments) mark the end of federal transfers as a major source of support for post-secondary education in Canada. Through the Canadian Job Strategy Program we see the retreat from publicly funded skills training and development and a shift towards privatized training shaped by industry groups. In student assistance we see increasing assumptions about family contributions to the costs of post-secondary education, accompanied by new government mechanisms to encourage family savings and tax credits for post-secondary expenditures. Grant support in student financial assistance has shifted from universal programs to support for targeted groups. At the same time, the federal government has taken on a more direct approach in post-secondary education—getting funds directly into the hands of institutions, researchers and students. It has accomplished this by investing in various ways in the direct and (for the first time) indirect costs of research and by increasing student grants, scholarships and tax credits associated with the costs of student education.

Provincial government coordination

The constitutional division of powers in Canada provides that the provincial governments are directly responsible for the funding, regulation and coordination of post-secondary education. In each province a government ministry has been assigned responsibility for post-secondary education, and decisions related to funding and coordination take place within the political context of the province. The Council of Ministers of Education Canada provides a forum for the sharing of information across provincial jurisdictions, but each province has its own regulatory framework, its own policy mechanisms and its own unique institutional structures and arrangements.

Perhaps the clearest trend in provincial government coordination in Canada during the past decade is that the provinces are moving in quite different policy directions in terms of their approaches to the regulation and control of higher education. The sudden reduction in federal transfers in the mid-1990s led to idiosyncratic provincial responses, but there have been common themes associated with changes in provincial coordination, especially in terms of increasing institutional diversity, system-level

coordination, increasing institutional competition and the use of market-like mechanisms, and changes in accountability arrangements.

Institutional diversity

Historically, Canadian higher education has been described as having a binary structure involving universities and non-degree-granting post-secondary institutions commonly referred to as community colleges. Regardless of the province, post-secondary education has been a state-regulated, secular, publicly funded enterprise characterized by a high level of institutional autonomy for universities. Described as a public monopoly (Skolnik, 1987), degree granting has been strictly controlled by the provincial governments in Canada. Provincial governments have in the past treated universities equally with regards to the distribution of grants and resources. This equality of treatment has made for a relatively homogeneous university system of post-secondary education without the formal stratification of institutions found elsewhere. State authority over universities is delegated to a corporate board made up of government appointees overseeing the administration of the university, and a senate primarily made up of faculty as the governing body responsible for academic issues. There is little interference or regulation by provincial governments in the internal day-to-day university decision-making. The main areas of intrusion occur in relation to funding and accounting for funds. Otherwise, universities control their own hiring, curriculum and admissions (Jones, 2006).

By contrast, community colleges are generally subject to greater government regulation and control than universities. Colleges vary by function and features across the provinces (Dennison, 1995). In some provinces colleges are comprehensive, applied, technical institutes running parallel to the universities without a university-transfer function (for example, Ontario). In other provinces (for example, British Columbia, Alberta and Quebec) they serve as feeder institutions for universities, with an explicit transfer process built in. In either case, the colleges have a vocational education function and serve the needs of the labour market. The Quebec *Colleges d'enseignement general et professionnel* (CEGEP) are comprehensive, public institutions that offer a two-year pre-university program (which is required for admission to university) and a three-year career or technical program. In New Brunswick the provincial college is essentially operated directly by the provincial ministry, while in most provinces community colleges have individual governing boards operating under sector-wide legislation.

In the 1990s a number of provinces took steps to increase the level of institutional diversity, largely in an attempt to increase the range of options available to students and, ostensibly, to address accessibility. British Columbia created a network of university colleges by selectively expanding the mandate of a number of existing community colleges to include full undergraduate degree programs. More recently, Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario have revised legislation and expanded degree-granting authority, with some restrictions, to community colleges, specialized art colleges and private universities. In Alberta and Ontario college degree granting is

limited to applied degrees, but, across all three provinces, mechanisms have been developed for reviewing applications for authority to grant degrees, and for considering applications from private institutions seeking provincial recognition. Manitoba and Saskatchewan have approved the creation of new degree-granting institutions, including First Nations University, Canada's first university focusing on the needs of aboriginal populations, in Saskatchewan, and a new publicly supported Mennonite university and northern university in Manitoba.

There are implications for system organization and system governance associated with increased institutional diversity, and the once clear distinction between the university and non-university sector is blurring, altering the traditional binary nature of post-secondary education in Canada. New types of hybrid institutions that do not fit neatly into existing classification systems are emerging, along with innovative institutional partnerships across the university and non-university sectors. System regulation has been affected by these changes and we see provincial governments attempting to address the challenges of expansion and differentiation through the promotion of transfer arrangements between sectors, and the creation of new intermediary bodies in some provinces to review applications for new universities or new programmatic arrangements.

There are also unresolved issues related to the ways in which these new institutions and degree programs will be recognized by the more established institutions. There has never been a national accreditation or program assessment mechanism in Canada, in large part because of an assumption that Canadian universities were roughly equal in terms of standards. With the increasing expansion of degree granting, and the rise of hybrid programmatic and institutional arrangements, there may be a need for some form of national mechanism.

System-wide coordination

Given the binary institutional structure of higher education in most provinces, coordination structures and policies have tended to be sector-specific. Intermediary bodies with executive decision-making authority over the system have not been a dominant characteristic of Canadian post-secondary education. However, there appears to be a growing tendency towards the creation of coordination mechanisms or approaches that are system-wide, rather than focusing only on the university or community college sectors. Some provinces are revisiting the use of intermediary bodies or other agencies to advise the provincial ministries of education on planning, reviews and the assessment of new programs. Sector-specific intermediary bodies were created and abandoned in most provinces, including British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and, most recently, Ontario (in 1996) and Quebec (in 1993). In Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island provincial intermediary bodies were replaced by a regional Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission that provides advice to all three provinces.

Most provinces have moved towards the development of cross-sector, system-wide approaches to coordination. Alberta and British Columbia have a long history of

facilitating transfer and credit recognition between sectors through system-wide councils. Manitoba created a system-wide post-secondary council in 1996, whereas Newfoundland created in 1992 the Newfoundland and Labrador Council on Higher Education (Jones, 2006). Other provinces have created committees to facilitate articulation arrangements between sectors, or develop transfer guides to encourage greater transparency in terms of the possibilities for student mobility between sectors. Ontario has recently created the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, an independent agency that is mandated to conduct research on quality, participation and accessibility, and advise the government on the best ways to measure performance in this large post-secondary system (Shanahan *et al.*, 2005). While these intermediary bodies play a role in system coordination, they are essentially advisory; only Manitoba's Post-secondary Council has executive authority over some aspects of post-secondary policy.

Competition and marketization

In the early 1990s the political economy in Canada dramatically shifted. The effects of an economic recession for provincial governments were exacerbated by federal cuts in transfer payments. Provincial governments were searching for ways to reduce expenditures and raise income to finance post-secondary education. Provincial governments responded to the federal cuts in various ways, depending on the ideology of the government in power. In Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta neo-liberal government policies prevailed. These included using fiscal strategies that employed market mechanisms and market principles to allocate resources, generate revenues, and address accessibility and accountability (Young, 2002; Jones & Young, 2004; Shanahan *et al.*, 2005). Tuition was deregulated, or partially deregulated, and increased; operating grants were decreased, and key performance indicators were attached to a portion of institutional funding (see Alberta, 2005). Rationalization and planning of post-secondary education came to the forefront, driven by fiscal restraint. In some provinces, such as Ontario, 'planning' amounted to 'reacting to' economic pressures, and fiscal policies were used deliberately to shake up the system instead of to provide it with much-needed coherence and direction (Shanahan *et al.*, 2005). In other provinces, such as Quebec, provincial governments held fast to tuition freezes and low tuition policies, while succumbing to funding attached to performance measures (Trottier & Bernatchez, 2005).

It is perhaps in the area of tuition fee policies that the clearest differences between provincial approaches can be found. While in some provinces tuition fees have escalated dramatically (British Columbia, Ontario, Nova Scotia), in others provincial governments have taken steps to freeze or even reduce them (Manitoba, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador). Across all provinces, however, one can discern an increased use of targeted grant mechanisms and matching fund schemes, frequently designed to encourage competition for funds within the sector and increase a market presence in the system. These arrangements are over and above the highly competitive nature of federal government's approach to funding research and development.

Accountability

Institutions of higher education are subjected to increasing requirements for accountability, both in terms of changing approaches to accountability within post-secondary policy and of broader public sector accountability requirements that have an impact on post-secondary institutions. Accountability is far from a new aspect of provincial policy arrangements, but there seems to be an increasing emphasis on the development of structures that focus on a direct accountability relationship between the individual institution and government, rather than more holistic, sector-wide approaches. The development of institutional contracts between universities and government in Quebec, for example, is designed to document institutional obligations. Ontario is now moving towards multi-year, institution-specific, enrolment and accountability agreements with government. In some other provinces new money comes with requirements that universities submit accountability plans to spell out improvements to be made and specific results that will be achieved with the funds.

In many of the provinces the growth in the private career college sector has triggered reviews of the legislation relating to this sector. Though this sector has to date been largely invisible in terms of government regulation and national data systems, concerns over the need for increased consumer protection and a desire on the part of government to determine the conditions under which students attending private career colleges are eligible for student financial assistance have led to increased regulation and institutional accountability.

Public institutions are increasingly held accountable under the terms of broad, public-sector arrangements, and institutions of higher education are increasingly viewed as member institutions within this broader public sector. Institutions of higher education must provide accessibility services to address the needs of disabled populations under provincial human rights codes or disability acts. As major contractors with federal government agencies and councils, higher education institutions must fulfil the federal government's employment equity accountability requirements. Institutions of higher education are increasingly covered by provincial freedom of information and protection of privacy acts that mandate that institutions provide access to information under specific conditions, but also hold institutions accountable for ensuring that private information is protected.

Across Canada changes in the provincial government's role in coordinating post-secondary education have been driven by the policy priorities of accountability, quality, accessibility and efficiency. However, each province has taken different approaches to achieving these priorities. There is an overall trend towards the use of market mechanisms in fiscal policies, private sector partnerships, institutional diversity, system-wide coordination and an increasing emphasis on accountability exercises.

Conclusion

There have been major shifts in role since 1995 at both the federal and provincial levels of government in the coordination of higher education in Canada. The federal

government was the major source of financial support for the post-war massification of higher education in Canada through a system of formulaic provincial transfers that included an equalization component. The federal government's approach to provincial transfers was frequently modified, but the 1995 federal budget essentially changed the entire arrangement. The approach since then has shifted away from indirect funding of post-secondary education through transfer payments and towards providing support for research-intensive institutions in order to further the government's innovation agenda and addressing student financial support issues through a rather enigmatic combination of grants, initiatives designed to encourage family savings, and universal tax credits. The shift in funding has increased the federal government's influence over Canadian post-secondary education.

The federal government's mammoth investments in research and development signal a dramatic change in its role and approach. The federal government has shifted from simply sponsoring research activity, to providing major support for institutional and human resource research infrastructure. Research-intensive universities have been major beneficiaries of these new initiatives, but given the amount of money involved, almost all institutions of higher education have been planning strategically to strengthen their research infrastructure and productivity. A further consequence of the federal government's research policies has been to increase diversity within the post-secondary sector, based on research capacity. The reduction in importance of the federal block transfer and the increase in competitive research support have led to gender, disciplinary, institutional and regional disparities across the country. Women, the humanities, liberal arts institutions and the Atlantic and Prairie provinces have not been the largest beneficiaries (Shanahan *et al.*, 2005; Jones, 2006).

Also, the federal government's decision to create and endow private foundations as a mechanism to deal with post-secondary policy issues has been an interesting innovation in coordination during the period. In an era of large government surpluses, this approach has allowed the government to devote major resources in a single year to specific causes without making ongoing commitments. On the other hand, these foundations may represent a new form of government intermediary with somewhat ambiguous accountability relationships to both government and the sector that they have been asked to serve.

At both levels of government we see the increased involvement of industry and the private sector in post-secondary education. Federal and provincial governments have adopted market mechanisms in allocating resources and generating revenue, perhaps devolving some regulatory influence, if not authority, to the private sector or market. Provincial governments appear to be shifting the balance between university autonomy, state control and the market (Bruneau & Savage, 2002).

The traditional binary structures of Canadian higher education are becoming increasingly blurred in many provinces by an expansion in the range of institutions that have the authority to grant degrees, and by increased opportunities for experimentation in institutional partnerships and articulation arrangements. Provincial post-secondary systems are expanding. Provincial coordinating structures and

approaches have shifted focus from the 'sector' level (college or university sector) to the 'system' level. Governance and regulation are increasingly viewed from a cross-sector, system-wide perspective. Provincial governments are interested in increasing access to higher education, but also in increasing mobility within higher education by facilitating transfer between and within sectors. The government of Alberta's rebranding of its provincial higher education system in terms of 'Campus Alberta' provides an excellent example of a shift to a system-wide approach.

There are clear governance implications at the system and institutional levels of all these changes, which, combined, have created an increasingly complex policy environment. At the institutional level there are 'more ties that bind', more targets to be met, more funds to be matched, more partners to be found and more accountability plans to be submitted, as the government expands its mechanisms of control. While there are substantive differences by province, the institutional environment is generally far more competitive and increasingly viewed as stratified. The most research-intensive universities now meet regularly as a group to discuss common issues and develop lobbying strategies; a Canadian association of 'polytechnics' has been created to further the interests of elite community colleges that offer applied degrees and differentiate these institutions from others within the sector.

Over the past decade in Canada, at both levels of government, we see the state exerting stronger influence on post-secondary education. The federal government has used fiscal policy and its legitimate authority over the national economy to strengthen its role in post-secondary education. Provincial governments have expanded post-secondary systems and increased institutional diversity. At the same time, they have developed more mechanisms for controlling and shaping the coordination of the system. Clearly changing government roles have resulted in new intrusions and new innovations by both levels of government in the post-secondary domain, shifting post-secondary education a little closer towards the market in a country where post-secondary education has historically been a public enterprise. All of this has been accomplished without massive reform of the governance of post-secondary education in Canada.

Note

1. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC); the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC); and the Medical Research Council.

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