# REPOSITIONING ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION FOR YOUTH EMPLOYMENT AND SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA.

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**Abstract**

Nigeria continues to experience persistently high levels of youth unemployment despite numerous policy interventions aimed at stimulating economic growth and improving graduate employability. Although entrepreneurship education has been widely promoted as a viable strategy for addressing unemployment, its implementation has largely remained constrained by weak institutional support, inadequate funding, limited practical training, obsolete curricula, and weak linkages between educational institutions and industry. Existing studies have predominantly examined entrepreneurship education from descriptive and pedagogical perspectives, with limited attention to the institutional and policy reforms required to maximise its contribution to sustainable employment creation. This paper critically examines the role of entrepreneurship education in addressing youth unemployment in Nigeria and identifies strategic interventions capable of strengthening its effectiveness. The study adopts a qualitative, conceptual review approach through the synthesis of contemporary scholarly literature, policy documents, and reports from national and international development agencies. The review demonstrates that entrepreneurship education contributes significantly to innovation, employability, enterprise creation, and inclusive economic development when supported by competency-based curricula, experiential learning, digital entrepreneurship, business incubation, and effective public-private partnerships. The paper argues that transforming entrepreneurship education from a predominantly theoretical exercise into an innovation-driven ecosystem requires comprehensive curriculum reform, continuous capacity development for educators, improved access to finance for young entrepreneurs, and stronger collaboration between universities, industry, and government. The study concludes that repositioning entrepreneurship education within a coordinated national innovation framework represents a sustainable pathway for reducing youth unemployment and promoting inclusive economic development in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Entrepreneurship, Unemployment, Employability, Innovation, Nigeria.

## Introduction

Youth unemployment has emerged as one of the most persistent socio-economic and development challenges confronting developing economies, particularly those in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Nigeria, the number of graduates entering the labour market continues to increase annually, while the capacity of the formal economy to absorb them remains limited, resulting in high rates of unemployment, underemployment, poverty, and social exclusion (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024; World Bank, 2024). This situation has heightened concerns among policymakers, educators, and development agencies because prolonged unemployment undermines economic productivity, social cohesion, and sustainable development (OECD, 2023).

Despite its abundant human and natural resources, Nigeria continues to experience structural labour market constraints characterised by slow industrial growth, inadequate economic diversification, weak institutional capacity, and low private-sector job creation (World Bank, 2024). The National Bureau of Statistics (2023) reports that youth unemployment and underemployment remain significant development concerns, particularly among university graduates. These challenges have been associated with increasing poverty, irregular migration, insecurity, and declining national competitiveness (UNDP, 2024; ILO, 2024).

Globally, entrepreneurship education has gained considerable recognition as a strategic mechanism for improving graduate employability, fostering innovation, and promoting enterprise development. Rather than preparing graduates exclusively for paid employment, entrepreneurship education equips learners with opportunity-recognition skills, creativity, resilience, innovation capability, and business management competencies that enable them to establish sustainable enterprises and create employment opportunities for others (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2024). Recent empirical evidence further indicates that entrepreneurship education positively influences entrepreneurial intention, innovation capability, business start-up behaviour, and long-term employability when supported by experiential learning, mentorship, and business incubation programmes (Egbetokun, Olofinyehun, & Adelowo, 2024; Steira, Wigger, & Rasmussen, 2024).

Higher education institutions across Europe, Asia, and Africa are increasingly integrating entrepreneurship into multidisciplinary curricula through innovation hubs, business incubators, digital entrepreneurship programmes, university-industry partnerships, and project-based learning. These reforms reflect the growing recognition that entrepreneurial competence constitutes an essential component of twenty-first-century human capital and contributes significantly to sustainable economic development and national competitiveness (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2024; UNESCO, 2024).

Although entrepreneurship education became compulsory in Nigerian tertiary institutions following reforms introduced by the National Universities Commission (NUC), its implementation has produced mixed outcomes. Many universities continue to rely heavily on classroom-based instruction with limited opportunities for practical enterprise development, industry engagement, technology transfer, and access to entrepreneurial finance. Consequently, graduates frequently possess theoretical knowledge without the practical competencies required to establish sustainable businesses (Aina & Oladipo, 2023; Egbetokun et al., 2024).

Existing studies have established positive relationships between entrepreneurship education and graduate employability; however, much of the Nigerian literature remains descriptive and focuses primarily on curriculum delivery or entrepreneurial intentions. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to examining how institutional reforms, entrepreneurial ecosystems, digital transformation, and public-private partnerships can collectively strengthen entrepreneurship education as a sustainable strategy for reducing youth unemployment. Addressing this gap is essential because entrepreneurship education operates most effectively within supportive institutional environments rather than in isolation (Stam & Van de Ven, 2021; OECD, 2023).

Against this background, this paper critically examines the contribution of entrepreneurship education to youth employment and sustainable economic development in Nigeria. Specifically, it analyses the conceptual foundations of entrepreneurship education, explores its role in enhancing graduate employability, identifies institutional and policy constraints limiting programme effectiveness, and proposes evidence-based strategies for repositioning entrepreneurship education as a catalyst for innovation, enterprise development, and inclusive economic growth.

**Aim and Objectives of the study**

The aim of the study was to critically examine the role of entrepreneurship education in promoting youth employment and sustainable economic development in Nigeria. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to:

i. examine the conceptual foundations and significance of entrepreneurship education in Nigeria.

ii. assess the role of entrepreneurship education in enhancing graduate employability and reducing youth unemployment.

iii. identify the institutional, policy, and implementation challenges limiting the effectiveness of entrepreneurship education in Nigeria.

iv. evaluate the contribution of entrepreneurship education to sustainable economic development and the achievement of relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

v. propose evidence-based strategies for repositioning entrepreneurship education through curriculum reform, innovation, digital entrepreneurship and business incubation.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored primarily on Human Capital Theory, complemented by the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Theory. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for explaining how entrepreneurship education contributes to youth employability, enterprise creation, and sustainable economic development.

Human Capital Theory, originally developed by Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964), posits that investments in education, training, and skills development enhance individuals' productivity, innovation capacity, and earning potential. Within entrepreneurship education, the theory suggests that entrepreneurial knowledge, technical competencies, creativity, and problem-solving abilities constitute forms of human capital that increase individuals' capacity to identify opportunities, establish viable enterprises, and generate employment. Contemporary studies continue to demonstrate that entrepreneurship education significantly strengthens entrepreneurial intention, innovation capability, and venture creation when learning is competency-based and experiential rather than purely theoretical.

However, Human Capital Theory alone cannot adequately explain entrepreneurial success because entrepreneurial outcomes are also shaped by institutional quality, access to finance, regulatory environments, mentorship, technology, and market networks. Consequently, this study complements Human Capital Theory with the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Theory, which argues that entrepreneurship flourishes where universities, government, financial institutions, industries, incubators, investors, and innovation-support organisations interact within an enabling environment. The ecosystem perspective recognises that entrepreneurship education is most effective when classroom instruction is integrated with business incubation, industry partnerships, digital innovation, mentoring, and access to entrepreneurial finance.

Within the Nigerian context, entrepreneurship education has expanded considerably following government policy reforms. Nevertheless, weak institutional coordination, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient funding, obsolete curricula, and limited university-industry collaboration continue to constrain programme effectiveness. Consequently, graduates often possess theoretical entrepreneurial knowledge without acquiring the practical competencies necessary for enterprise creation.

This study therefore argues that reducing youth unemployment requires simultaneous investment in entrepreneurial human capital and the strengthening of Nigeria's entrepreneurial ecosystem. Such an integrated approach provides a stronger theoretical explanation for how entrepreneurship education can stimulate innovation, improve graduate employability, promote enterprise development, and contribute to sustainable national development.

**Concept of Entrepreneurship Education**

Entrepreneurship education has evolved considerably over the past three decades from a narrow focus on business creation towards a broader educational philosophy aimed at developing innovative, opportunity-oriented, and resilient individuals capable of creating economic and social value. Contemporary entrepreneurship education therefore extends beyond teaching students how to establish businesses; it seeks to cultivate entrepreneurial mindsets, creativity, leadership, opportunity recognition, critical thinking, adaptability, and innovation across diverse professional contexts.

Earlier definitions primarily conceptualised entrepreneurship education as the acquisition of business management knowledge required for establishing and managing enterprises. More recent scholarship, however, recognises entrepreneurship education as an interdisciplinary process through which learners acquire entrepreneurial competencies, develop entrepreneurial self-efficacy, and learn to transform innovative ideas into sustainable solutions for societal challenges. Systematic reviews published in 2024 and 2025 demonstrate that the field has increasingly shifted towards experiential learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, digital entrepreneurship, sustainability, and entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Rather than relying exclusively on conventional classroom instruction, contemporary entrepreneurship education emphasises experiential pedagogies, including project-based learning, business simulations, innovation laboratories, business incubation centres, internships, mentorship programmes, design thinking, and industry partnerships. These approaches enable learners to acquire practical entrepreneurial competencies while simultaneously strengthening confidence, creativity, resilience, and opportunity recognition.

Recent literature also highlights the increasing importance of digital entrepreneurship within entrepreneurship education. Advances in artificial intelligence, digital platforms, e-commerce, financial technology, and digital marketing have transformed entrepreneurial practice worldwide. Consequently, universities are increasingly incorporating digital innovation, data analytics, technology commercialisation, and AI-supported entrepreneurial learning into entrepreneurship curricula to prepare graduates for emerging labour markets.

Within developing economies such as Nigeria, entrepreneurship education performs an additional developmental function. Beyond promoting individual enterprise creation, it contributes to poverty reduction, employment generation, economic diversification, social inclusion, and community resilience. However, the effectiveness of entrepreneurship education remains constrained by several structural challenges, including inadequate funding, obsolete instructional facilities, insufficient practical exposure, weak university-industry collaboration, and limited access to entrepreneurial finance.

The contemporary discourse therefore suggests that entrepreneurship education should no longer be viewed merely as an academic subject but rather as an integrated innovation ecosystem that connects educational institutions, government agencies, private-sector organisations, financial institutions, technology hubs, and local communities. Such integration strengthens graduate employability, enhances enterprise survival, and promotes sustainable economic development.

Accordingly, this paper conceptualises entrepreneurship education as a multidisciplinary, competency-based, and innovation-driven process that equips learners with the knowledge, practical skills, entrepreneurial mindset, and institutional support necessary to identify opportunities, establish sustainable enterprises, generate employment, and contribute meaningfully to national development.

**Entrepreneurship Education, Graduate Employability, and Sustainable Development**

Entrepreneurship education has become a strategic policy instrument for improving graduate employability, stimulating innovation, and promoting sustainable economic development across both developed and developing economies. As labour markets become increasingly dynamic due to technological change, globalization, artificial intelligence, demographic shifts, and economic uncertainty, higher education institutions are expected to produce graduates who are not only academically competent but also entrepreneurial, innovative, and adaptable. Consequently, entrepreneurship education has evolved from being an optional component of business education into a multidisciplinary approach for developing entrepreneurial competencies that enhance employability and stimulate enterprise creation (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2024).

Graduate employability extends beyond obtaining paid employment; it encompasses the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and personal attributes that enable graduates to secure meaningful work, adapt to changing labour-market conditions, sustain career development, and create employment opportunities for others. Recent evidence suggests that entrepreneurship education strengthens entrepreneurial intention, opportunity recognition, creativity, critical thinking, leadership, resilience, financial literacy, communication, teamwork, and digital competence, all of which are increasingly demanded in contemporary labour markets. A comprehensive review of entrepreneurship education literature identified opportunity recognition, resource mobilisation, innovation, networking, and strategic decision-making as core entrepreneurial skills developed through effective entrepreneurship programmes.

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate a positive relationship between entrepreneurship education and graduate employability. However, the effectiveness of entrepreneurship education depends largely on programme quality, experiential learning, institutional support, industry collaboration, mentorship, and access to entrepreneurial resources. Research from the United Kingdom found that entrepreneurship education contributes to employability when universities integrate practical learning with employer engagement, mentoring, and stakeholder collaboration rather than relying exclusively on classroom-based instruction. Similarly, recent reviews conclude that entrepreneurship programmes incorporating business incubation, project-based learning, internships, simulations, and enterprise development initiatives produce stronger employment outcomes than theory-oriented programmes.

Within Nigeria, entrepreneurship education has assumed greater importance because of persistent youth unemployment, limited industrial expansion, and the rapid growth of the informal economy. Since the National Universities Commission introduced compulsory entrepreneurship education in tertiary institutions, universities have made considerable progress in curriculum development. Nevertheless, implementation remains constrained by inadequate funding, obsolete instructional facilities, insufficient practical exposure, weak university-industry collaboration, and limited access to entrepreneurial finance. These institutional weaknesses reduce graduates' confidence and preparedness for entrepreneurial practice. Recent Nigerian studies similarly report that practical, industry-based entrepreneurship education significantly improves graduate employability and entrepreneurial self-efficacy, while theory-dominated programmes yield comparatively weaker outcomes.

Entrepreneurship education also contributes directly to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). The International Labour Organization emphasises that equipping young people with entrepreneurial, digital, and technical competencies is essential for improving labour-market resilience and supporting inclusive economic growth. Likewise, UNESCO advocates competency-based Technical and Vocational Education and Training

(TVET) that integrates entrepreneurship, innovation, and digital technologies to prepare graduates for emerging economic opportunities.

Overall, the literature indicates that entrepreneurship education should not be viewed merely as preparation for self-employment but as a comprehensive strategy for developing entrepreneurial human capital, strengthening innovation ecosystems, and enhancing national competitiveness. For Nigeria to realise these benefits, entrepreneurship education must be transformed from predominantly theoretical instruction into an experiential, technology-enabled, and industry-connected system supported by coherent public policies, sustainable investment, business incubation centres, and strong collaboration among universities, government agencies, financial institutions, and the private sector.

**Strategies for Strengthening Entrepreneurship Education in Nigeria**

Addressing the persistent challenge of youth unemployment in Nigeria requires a comprehensive transformation of entrepreneurship education from a predominantly theoretical academic exercise into an innovation-driven system that equips graduates with practical competencies, entrepreneurial mindsets, and the capacity to create sustainable enterprises. International experience demonstrates that countries with vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystems combine curriculum innovation, institutional support, public-private partnerships, digital technologies, and effective policy implementation to produce successful entrepreneurs and improve labour-market outcomes (OECD, 2023; Global Entrepreneurship Monitor [GEM], 2024). Against this background, several strategic interventions are necessary to reposition entrepreneurship education in Nigeria.

**Curriculum Reform and Competency-Based Learning**

The entrepreneurship curriculum in many Nigerian tertiary institutions remains largely knowledge-driven, emphasizing theoretical concepts with limited opportunities for experiential learning. Contemporary entrepreneurship education requires a competency-based curriculum that integrates opportunity recognition, business planning, financial management, innovation, digital entrepreneurship, leadership, sustainability, and problem-solving. Students should engage in real-life business projects, simulations, internships, business competitions, and enterprise incubation programmes that bridge the gap between classroom learning and entrepreneurial practice. Studies indicate that experiential learning significantly improves entrepreneurial intention, business start-up competence, and graduate employability (Neck, Greene, & Brush, 2024; UNESCO, 2024).

**Strengthening University–Industry Collaboration**

One of the major weaknesses of entrepreneurship education in Nigeria is the limited interaction between higher education institutions and industry. Effective university-industry collaboration exposes students to practical business environments, facilitates technology transfer, enhances innovation, and improves graduate employability. Universities should establish strategic partnerships with private-sector organisations, chambers of commerce, manufacturing firms, financial institutions, technology companies, and entrepreneurship support organisations. Such collaborations should include internships, industrial attachments, mentorship programmes, collaborative research, guest lectures by entrepreneurs, and commercialization of university research outputs. Evidence from OECD countries suggests that strong university-industry linkages significantly enhance entrepreneurial success and innovation performance (OECD, 2023).

**Establishment of Business Incubation and Innovation Hubs**

Universities should move beyond classroom instruction by establishing business incubation centres and innovation hubs where students receive mentoring, workspace, technical support, networking opportunities, and access to seed funding. Business incubators provide an enabling environment for transforming innovative ideas into viable enterprises while reducing the risks associated with business start-ups. Globally, incubation programmes have been associated with higher business survival rates, improved innovation, and increased employment generation (World Bank, 2024).

**Digital Entrepreneurship and Emerging Technologies**

Rapid technological advancement is reshaping entrepreneurial activities worldwide. Entrepreneurship education should therefore integrate digital competencies such as e-commerce, artificial intelligence, digital marketing, financial technology (FinTech), data analytics, cloud computing, cybersecurity, and business intelligence. Graduates equipped with digital entrepreneurial skills are better positioned to compete within the global knowledge economy and establish technology-driven enterprises. UNESCO (2024) emphasizes that digital transformation has become an essential component of modern Technical and Vocational Education and Training

(TVET), while the ILO (2024) identifies digital skills as critical for future employment resilience.

**Sustainable Financing for Student Entrepreneurs**

Limited access to finance remains one of the most significant barriers confronting young entrepreneurs in Nigeria. Many graduates possess innovative business ideas but lack the financial resources required for enterprise establishment and expansion. Government should collaborate with development finance institutions, commercial banks, venture capital firms, angel investors, and microfinance institutions to establish entrepreneurship financing schemes specifically targeted at graduates. Financial support should be accompanied by business development services, financial literacy training, mentorship, and performance monitoring to improve enterprise sustainability.

**Capacity Development for Entrepreneurship Educators**

The quality of entrepreneurship education depends largely on the competence of instructors. Many educators possess strong academic qualifications but limited entrepreneurial experience. Continuous professional development programmes should therefore expose lecturers to emerging entrepreneurial practices, digital innovation, business incubation, design thinking, venture financing, and experiential teaching methodologies. Faculty exchange programmes with industry practitioners and international institutions would further strengthen teaching quality and curriculum relevance.

**Policy Coordination and Institutional Governance**

Although Nigeria has introduced several entrepreneurship-related policies, implementation remains fragmented due to weak institutional coordination and inconsistent funding. A coherent national entrepreneurship education framework should clearly define the responsibilities of universities, regulatory agencies, government ministries, financial institutions, and the private sector. Regular monitoring and evaluation should assess programme effectiveness using measurable indicators such as graduate start-up rates, business survival, employment generation, innovation outputs, and industry partnerships. Effective governance mechanisms would enhance accountability and ensure that entrepreneurship education contributes meaningfully to national development objectives.

### Promoting Inclusive and Sustainable Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship education should deliberately promote inclusive participation among women, persons with disabilities, rural youth, and other marginalized groups. In addition, entrepreneurship curricula should integrate sustainability principles by encouraging green entrepreneurship, circular economy practices, renewable energy solutions, climate-smart agriculture, and environmentally responsible business models. Such an approach aligns entrepreneurship education with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and strengthens its contribution to inclusive economic growth and environmental sustainability.

Collectively, these strategies demonstrate that improving entrepreneurship education requires coordinated investments in curriculum reform, institutional capacity, innovation ecosystems, digital transformation, sustainable financing, and effective governance. Entrepreneurship education should therefore be repositioned not merely as an academic programme but as a strategic national development instrument capable of stimulating innovation, creating employment, reducing poverty, and enhancing Nigeria's global competitiveness.

## Conclusion and Policy Implications

### Conclusion

The persistent rise in youth unemployment in Nigeria underscores the urgent need to reposition entrepreneurship education as a strategic instrument for sustainable economic transformation rather than merely an academic requirement. This review has demonstrated that entrepreneurship education possesses significant potential to improve graduate employability, stimulate innovation, promote enterprise creation, and enhance inclusive economic growth. However, these outcomes remain constrained by structural weaknesses, including outdated curricula, inadequate funding, insufficient practical training, weak university–industry collaboration, limited access to entrepreneurial finance, and fragmented policy implementation.

The analysis further reveals that entrepreneurship education is most effective when embedded within a functional entrepreneurial ecosystem that integrates higher education institutions, government agencies, private-sector organisations, financial institutions, innovation hubs, and technology-driven enterprises. Such an ecosystem enables students to acquire not only entrepreneurial knowledge but also the practical competencies, digital capabilities, professional networks, and financial support necessary for successful venture creation.

The study also demonstrates that entrepreneurship education contributes directly to national development by strengthening human capital, promoting innovation, reducing poverty, supporting economic diversification, and advancing the attainment of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDGs 4, 8, 9, and 10. Consequently, entrepreneurship education should be repositioned as a core component of Nigeria's national employment, industrialisation, and innovation strategies.

**Recommendation**

This paper extends the application of Human Capital Theory by demonstrating that investments in entrepreneurial knowledge alone are insufficient to improve employment outcomes unless supported by enabling institutional and innovation ecosystems. By integrating Human Capital Theory with the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem perspective, the study provides a more comprehensive explanation of how entrepreneurship education contributes to enterprise development and sustainable employment generation within developing economies.

The findings suggest several policy priorities for the Federal Government of Nigeria, the National Universities Commission (NUC), the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), tertiary institutions, development partners, and the private sector.

1. Entrepreneurship curricula should be redesigned around competency-based and experiential learning approaches that integrate digital entrepreneurship, artificial intelligence, financial technology, sustainability, and innovation management.

2. Government should substantially increase investment in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), entrepreneurship laboratories, business incubation centres, innovation hubs, and entrepreneurship research.

3. Stronger institutional collaboration between universities, industries, financial institutions, and technology organisations should be promoted through internships, mentorship programmes, collaborative research, and commercialization of university innovations.

4. Dedicated financing mechanisms, including graduate entrepreneurship funds, seed grants, venture capital initiatives, and credit guarantee schemes, should be expanded to improve young entrepreneurs' access to capital.

5. Entrepreneurship education policies should incorporate robust monitoring and evaluation systems using measurable indicators such as graduate start-up rates, business survival rates, employment creation, innovation outputs, and private-sector participation.

For higher education institutions, the study highlights the need to move beyond conventional classroom instruction toward practice-oriented entrepreneurial learning. Universities should establish innovation centres, entrepreneurship clinics, enterprise accelerators, and multidisciplinary project laboratories that enable students to transform innovative ideas into commercially viable enterprises.

Educators should adopt learner-centred pedagogies, including project-based learning, business simulations, design thinking, case studies, mentorship, and industry engagement. These approaches are more effective in developing entrepreneurial competence than traditional lecture-based methods.

Private-sector organisations should play a greater role in curriculum design, industrial placements, mentorship, and entrepreneurial financing, thereby ensuring that entrepreneurship education remains responsive to labour-market needs.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study is conceptual in nature and relies primarily on the synthesis of existing literature, policy reports, and theoretical perspectives. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted within the context of the reviewed literature. The study does not provide primary empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of entrepreneurship education programmes across Nigerian institutions.

**Directions for Future Research**

Future studies should employ longitudinal and mixed-methods research designs to examine the long-term effects of entrepreneurship education on graduate employability, enterprise survival, business growth, and income generation. Comparative studies across African countries would further enhance understanding of institutional factors influencing entrepreneurship education outcomes. In addition, future research should investigate the emerging roles of artificial intelligence, digital entrepreneurship, green entrepreneurship, and innovation ecosystems in shaping entrepreneurial behaviour among university graduates.

Overall, transforming entrepreneurship education into a dynamic, innovation-driven, and practice-oriented system will require sustained collaboration among government, educational institutions, industry, financial organisations, and development partners. Such coordinated efforts will significantly enhance Nigeria's capacity to reduce youth unemployment, stimulate innovation, strengthen economic resilience, and achieve sustainable national development.

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