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Research priorities of adult education university members in Greece

Abstract: The work reported herein presents the results of a research project, which was implemented using the Delphi method and had as its objective to identify the research priorities in the field of adult education in Greece. The research priorities were identified both as thematic research areas and as specific research proposals within these areas. The participants were twenty-seven faculty members from Greek universities who have long experience in teaching and researching in adult education. The results of the three-round Delphi process revealed the participants' conceptualizations of what constitutes key research that needs to be conducted in the field of adult education in Greece.

Keywords: research priorities, adult education, Delphi method.

Introduction

The last ten years adult education in Greece has been developing rapidly as a discrete scientific and professional field. The number of university departments that offer undergraduate courses and graduate study programmes in adult education has increased (Sipitanou & Papakonstantinou, 2004). Non-governmental scientific associations have been founded and are actively engaged in the professional development of the field (e.g. Hellenic Adult Education Association – www.adult-educ.gr, Panhellenic Association of Adult Educators – www.pasee.gr, Association for Adult Education – www.aae.org.gr) while recently the National Accreditation Centre for Continuing Vocational Training (www.ekepis.gr) developed and pre-

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sented a detailed profile for the profession of the adult educator. Additionally, the qualifications' accreditation process for adult educators in continuing vocational training and in general adult education has started dynamically, while more and more publications on adult learning and education may be found nowadays in bookstores and public libraries (Kokkos, 2008).

In this environment, one of the basic questions that emerges concerns the orientation of the field of adult education in Greece. Where are we going? What are the next steps? How is the field going to be more advanced? There is a sense that these fundamental questions need to be answered prior to the further development of the field. The aforementioned questions are strongly related with a very important point of inquiry: what kind of research do we need in order to further promote the development of the field of adult education in Greece?

To answer the latter question we undertook the initiative to implement a research project in order to prepare a research priority list, which could eventually inform the field of adult education in Greece. The Delphi technique was used to elicit the opinions of 27 faculty members from Greek Universities who have an extensive experience in researching and teaching adult education. Since this particular research project concerned a specific context, we will start the presentation of its results with a brief review of some historical data about the evolution of adult education in Greece.

A brief overview of the development of adult education in Greece

The first adult education initiatives appear in the second half of the 19th century, through the activities of a series of private organizations and cultural associations whose aim was to fight the phenomenon of illiteracy in modern Greece. (Vergidis, et al, 1999, p. 12). Authors like Fourre and Theodosopoulos (1996, p.12) and Vergidis (ibid., p. 15) indicate a few characteristic names of these associations: "Hellenic Welfare", "Friends of the People", "Association for the Diffusion of Greek Letters", "Women's Association for Feminine Education." The Greek State interest in adult education was articulated for the first time in 1929, through an act of law (4397/1929) wherein the problem of adult illiteracy is officially recognized. However, after those first steps and most likely due to social, economic and political obstacles, the adult education field remained stagnant for several decades, having only as its aim to contribute to the propaganda of every political party elected in government (Vergidis, 1999, Kokkos, 2005). We should acknowledge though, that during the 1950's some very important efforts for the development of continuing professional training were implemented, mainly by

specialized state services like the Extension Service Bureau (*Diefthinsi Georgikon Efarmogon)* of the Ministry of Agriculture – (Koutsouris, 1999). Nevertheless, on the subject of the broader social role of adult education there is a sense that up to the decade of 1980, adult education in Greece was a non-appreciated institution (Kokkos, 2008).

Adult education in Greece does not follow the route of the other countries. In Europe and the rest of the countries that belong to the so-called "western world," adult education is a socially acknowledged institution and during the 1960's it went through a period of serious doubts regarding its efficiency. These doubts are the result of an intensive critique which concerned all levels of educational policies, and had its base in the fact that, beyond the significant investments in education in Europe after the Second World War, the capability of the educational system to contribute towards the battle against social, economical and educational inequalities was entirely unsatisfactory (Karabel & Halsey, 1977, Griffin, 1987). It was this very doubting process which guided the search for new models of adult educational policy and led eventually to the well-known reports on adult education initially by UNESCO (Faure, 1972) and then by OECD (OECD, 1989). These reports presented in two different decades support two dissimilar philosophies. The UNESCO report is more humanistic, focusing on democratization, voluntarism, and citizenship while the OECD report emphasizes more on the development of human resources focusing on high technology skills and science (Rubenson, 2004).

While these significant developments were taking place in Europe, adult education in Greece appears dynamically a few years after the fall of the military junta in 1974. The launch of the new era occurred right after the election of the first social-democratic government in 1981, which coincides with the entrance of the country in the European Union. (Chassapis, 2000; Kokkos, 2008). The social-democratic government very soon initiated a Popular Education program adopting the successful example of the Scandinavian popular education system. According to Kokkos (2008) during the period of 1981-1985 a series of innovative actions lead to the quality improvement of adult education provisions in Greece: "During these years, the General Secretariat of Popular Education was founded and several high-qualified people were employed to its departments. The Secretariat also recruited and placed in all the prefectures Popular Education Advisors. The advisors had an average age of 30-35 years and their responsibilities included the study of the training needs of the local population and the coordination of educational activities. Moreover, the General Secretariat founded and funded the Centre for Studies and Self-directed Learning (in Greek, K.E.M.E.A.) which undertook the training of the staff members of Popular Education, pub-

lished the journal *Self-directed Learning* and a number of books and organized a series of international conferences … The apex of all the activities was a visit by Paulo Freire in Greece with whom the staff of popular education discussed the application of his ideas." (Kokkos, 2008, p. 4)

However, after that temporary period of flourishing, the Popular Education program started to experience a gradual decline, and after 1986 a clear turn towards continuing professional training is observed. This turn had as a result directing the function of the adult education institutions towards a role which was characterised as complementary to the official educational system (Karalis, A. & Vergidis, D. 2004, Kokkos, 2005). This change was supported by the E.U. through the funding priorities of the European Social Fund, which following the directions of the aforementioned OECD report, presented and imposed as the prevailing strategy in adult education the provisions for continuing vocational training (Kokkos, 2005, p. 2008).

Indeed, the main volume of adult education activities of this era, in Greece, is focused on technology and more specifically on information technology. Therefore, from the end of the 1980's to the start of the 1990's the field of adult education experienced an enormous growth in participation numbers and implemented programmes. However, this development was based mainly in a rationale of absorbing as much E.U. funding as possible. As it is easily understood this was a not a feasible strategy that did not contribute to the building of a sustainable and socially constructive adult education system due to its one-sided orientation towards continuing vocational training. A series of researchers have stated that during this decade (1980-1990) the planning of programs was realized without any appraisal or assessment of the real training needs of the general population (Palios, 2003, Vergidis & Prokou, 2005, p. 59-70). Moreover, for the same period a complete absence of evaluation processes and a lack of coordination between the bodies which offer adult education provisions are observed (Kokkos, 2008). The result of all of the above was an irrational distribution of the available funding which in some cases was characterized as completely inefficient (Vergidis & Prokou, ibid.).

To confront the abovementioned dysfunctional phenomena and after a series of directives from the E.U. authorities, the Hellenic Ministry of Labour (today Ministry of Employment) took over the control and management of all the continuing vocational training activities in the country. The result of this development is a series of ministerial decisions which led to the foundation of the Centres for Vocational Training (in Greek, K.E.K.). These new establishments are accredited and evaluated by an independent National Accreditation Centre (Kokkos, 2005). Moreover, recently the same Centre designed and implemented

the first national training of trainers program, which led to the accreditation of qualifications of about 10.000 adult trainers all over the country (Karalis & Kokkos, 2008). However, beyond the Centres of Vocational Training where we may claim that an accreditation and evaluation process is now in existence, there are other public and private organisations which, either without accreditation or with self-accrediting procedures, continue to offer continuing vocational training programs for adults in Greece (Kokkos, 2005).

On the other hand, in the area of general adult education (a term which substituted the "popular education" term in Greek educational policy) most of the activities are under the auspice of the General Secretariat of Lifelong Learning (www.gsae.edu.gr), which is the successor of the Secretariat of Popular Education. Having as its main policy implementation "tools" the Adult Education Centres and the Second Chance Schools, the Secretariat has as a mission to fight illiteracy, to educate socially marginalized groups, to implement language learning programs for immigrants, and to offer information technology courses to the general adult population of Greece. Moreover, the Secretariat organizes educational programs in the area of environmental education, and recently it launched its own training and accreditation program for the people who are employed as trainers in all of its programs (Tsimpoukli & Phillips, 2007).

In the field of tertiary education, one of the most important developments concerning the field of adult education is the start of the operation of the Hellenic Open University (hereafter H.O.U.) in 1997. The H.O.U. is the only university in Greece which addresses its programs exclusively to adults (one of the basic admission criteria is age), and offers all the undergraduate and postgraduate programs through distance learning methods. Moreover, the H.O.U. offered the first master's level program in adult education and learning.

Finally, another important development that contributes towards the professionalisation of the field is the foundation of the Hellenic Adult Education Association (hereafter H.A.E.A.). The H.A.E.A. is a non-profit, non-governmental organization. The mission of the association is to promote the scientific development of adult education in Greece to support the professional development of its members, to enhance communication, and to create a sense of community among its members (see www.adulteduc.gr) .

From all the above we may argue that the field of adult education in Greece is in a stage of rapid development. All the new institutions, organizations and associations together with the efforts to professionalize the field create a complex mosaic with many conflicting elements. In this environment we believe that it is important to inform the field with a research orientation.

Methodology

The Delphi method is a forecasting technique used to elicit the opinions of a group of experts, whose views about a specific subject are considered significant. The technique is a structured procedure for the collection and processing of knowledge, which originates from a group of experts. The collection is implemented with the use of questionnaires employed in a controlled procedure of continuing feedback, in rounds (Adler & Ziglio, 1996). In education, the specific method has been used in several research efforts. Some of the most characteristic examples of its use were to assist decision making about educational policy (Clayton, 1997) and to predict the future developments in technical and vocational education (Mykerezi, 2003). In adult education, the most well known case of using the Delphi method to inform educational policy is the research project known Eurodelphi (Leirman, 1995) which was implemented in order to collect the opinions of staff, researchers and decision makers in the field about the perspectives and the problems of the field in the decade of 1990. Another similar task where the Delphi method was used to elicit information was the SAEDA project, which aimed to reveal the opinion of trainers and trainees in the field of adult education about the potential strategies that could be followed in order to improve the provisions of the field at a regional level. (Vergidis et. al. 2000). Moreover, the Delphi method was also used in other research projects related to the identification of key knowledge and skills for the adult educator (Rossman & Bunning, 1978, Daniel & Rose, 1982).

However, our decision to use the Delphi method was influenced by the fact that the same technique was successfully used in the past within similar research projects, in different contexts, that aimed in developing research agendas in education and adult education (Long, 1991; Wright, 2007a, 2007b).

Participant selection

It is apparent that one of the most crucial elements for the success of a Delphi technique is the selection of the participants in the expert group. Since the results of the technique depend on the knowledge and the spirit of cooperation of the participants, it is obvious that the issue of the field representation is substituted by the added value of purposive participation (Fink & Kosecoff, 1985; Gordon, 1993). Most of the known studies use between 15 and 35 experts, while the response rate in all the rounds is usually between 40 and 75 per cent. (Gordon, 1993; Rowe & Wright, 1999). For this Delphi study, the participants were

twenty-seven (27) university faculty members who teach and research in the field of adult education either as adjunct lecturers or as full-time faculty (lecturers, assistant professors, associate professors and professors). Table 1 presents the distribution of the participants in relation to their institutional affiliation and table 2 presents the distribution of the participants in relation to their professional title in their own academic institution.

Table 1: Participants – Institutional Affiliation

Institutional Affiliation	Participants
Hellenic Open University	15
University of Patras	3
School of Pedagogical & Technical Education (ASPAITE)	3
University of Macedonia	2
Panteion University	2
University of the Aegean	1
University of Thessaly	1
Total	27

Table 2: Participants – professional titles

Professional title	Participants
Professors	3
Associate Professors	2
Assistant Professors	4
Lecturers	4
Adjunct lecturers	14
Total	27

It is apparent from the above tables that the participants from the H.O.U. outnumber their colleagues from other institutions. This fact is justified since the H.O.U. with an annual enrolment of 140 graduate students in its adult education master's course, runs the largest graduate programme in adult education in Greece. Therefore it employs more faculty members in that specific discipline than any other university in Greece. We note however, that the vast majority of the faculty members of H.O.U. are adjunct lecturers and this explains the larger number of that specific category in Table 2. We should also note that the all adjunct lecturers of the H.O.U. are at the same time employed in a variety of areas of adult education practice (i.e. trainers from the programmes of the General Secretariat of Lifelong Learning, banking sector trainers, trainers from the field of vocational guidance and counselling of former addicts, group therapists and

union training experts) and this was considered as an additional advantage of the specific group.

Limitations and ethical considerations

The use of the Delphi technique is recognized as an efficient, time saving, objective, focused and systematic procedure to collect opinions from experts in order to understand the trends for a specific topic of interest (Dalkey, 1969; Skutsch & Hall, 1973; Weatherman & Sevenson, 1974; Strauss & Zeigler, 1975). On the other hand, there are many criticisms regarding the application of the method. There have been concerns about the usefulness of the results since the future trends are easily changed by unpredictable events like political decisions (Linstone, 1978). Moreover, the continuing motivation of the participants is a delicate issue which many times demands special interpersonal skills from the researchers (Weaver, 1971). These issues were regarded before the implementation of the project. However, we considered that since this project is actually the first of its kind in the Greek adult education university context, the results of the research would be useful beyond their limitations.

In the specific research project ethical considerations were also well thought-out. All the participants were thoroughly informed about the scope of the research project, the time that they would have to devote in each round and their obligations. Therefore they could decide whether they could prefer to participate or not. During the whole process they were absolutely free to withdraw from the research, although we have to acknowledge that for the later there was in existence a tacit and informal commitment (the participation in all rounds was 100%) due to the fact that the scientific community of adult education is still small in Greece and the interpersonal relations among its members are to a certain extent influential. On the other hand the anonymity of the participants was kept in all phases of the procedure and the presentations of the views in every round were carefully implemented to avoid the exposure of the participants' identity (Cohen et al., 2000).

Specific procedures and results

The Delphi method is in essence a controlled form of developing arguments. Usually it utilizes a series of questionnaires which are distributed in the expert group in rounds. The answers in every round are submitted anonymously and

after processing they are resubmitted for evaluation and judgments to the whole group. This process in usually implemented in two or three rounds. At the end the opinion of the group is presented statistically using central tendency indexes. The number of the rounds is a quite crucial issue. Delbecq, Van de Ven & Gustafson (1975) support that Delphi research projects of three rounds are usually sufficient for every research issue. If the desired result is the consensus of a group whish is characterized by heterogeneity then three or more round are necessary. However if the group is homogeneous then three rounds are adequate to produce reliable results (Skumolski, Hartman & Krahn 2007).

In our research project we were interested not only to reach a consensus among the participants on the research priorities, but also to create a list of complementary and alternative research themes and items for the field of adult education in Greece. It was more as if we were contacting a structured dialogue among university faculty members. The participants completed individual questionnaires in three rounds. The initial questionnaire was open-ended and general and participants were asked to write up to ten research items that they considered as important for the field of adult education in Greece. Elaborating on the UNESCO report on the world trends in adult education research (UNESCO, 1999) we developed seven research categories. These categories were: a) theoretical foundations of the field, b) social-political-economical and historical dimensions, c) design, d) evaluation, e) professionalisation of the field, f) the practice of adult education and g) other priorities. The written answers from the first round were collected within a period of two months and they were categorized in the aforementioned categories. In total 211 research, items were collected. After their processing (i.e. eliminating similar items, creating more comprehensive items, etc.) we ended with 65 research items that were distributed as follows.

Table 3: Research items from the1st round

Research categories	Number of items
Theoretical foundations of the field	10
Social-political-economical and historical dimensions	15
Design	11
Evaluation	8
Professionalisation of the field	8
The practice of adult education	11
Other priorities	2
Total	65

In the second round, the participants were asked to review each item on the list and rate them on a Lickert-scale of 1-5 in terms of perceived significance for research in the field of adult education in Greece. The collection of the second round questionnaire lasted approximately one month and the responses were statistically analyzed with a specific focus on measures of central tendency and dispersion for each item. Following the procedure which was used in the Halifax Consultation project (Wright, 2007a, 2007b) we used the interquartile range (IQR) and the median answer to create three categories of initiatives for analysis [sic]:

1. Highly important items for research were considered these with a high median score (4-5) and low IQR range (0-1)
2. Not important items for research were considered these with low median score (1-2) and low IQR range (0-1)
3. Contentious items for research were considered these with a: High median score (4-5) but larger IQR (2-5).

These categories were used to develop the questionnaire of the third round. We used those items which were considered as highly important and contentious items to develop the following ten (10) new and broader research themes. We should note that in some cases we considered a research item as part of more than one research theme:

Research theme 1: Employment and adult education
a. Study of the in-service education and training policies in public organizations and private sector businesses.
b. Assessment of the relation among adult education, employment policies and social marginalisation in Greece.
c. The impact of lifelong education in production modifications.

Research theme 2: Assessment of the training needs in general and special population
a. Training needs assessment of the general population in local and international level.
b. Training needs assessment as they are perceived by the trainers.
c. Training needs assessment and identification of the participation parameters in adult education programs by adults of special social groups (e.g. former drug addicts, people positive in HIV, prison inmates, etc.).

    d.   Training needs assessment based on "secondary" aims of the educational process such as interests, the search for a deeper personal meaning, personal development, development of social and political participation, cultural development.

Research theme 3: Adult education in special social groups
    a.   Planning of training programs for special social groups like programs for longterm unemployed people or parental training programs.
    b.   Design and application of tools for the appraisal of the efficiency of adult education programs in different fields and especially in socially fragile groups.

Research theme 4: Adult educators: meaning, profile and professionalisation
    a.   What is the personal meaning of being an adult educator?
    b.   Identification of the profile of the adult educator in Greece.
    c.   In depth review of the profession of the adult educator: is it a profession or part-time job?
    d.   Identification of the attitudes and prejudices of the adult educators in relation with special groups of trainees.
    e.   In depth study of the terms and the requirements of professionalism, professionality and professionalisation of the adult educators.
    f.   Action-research as a tool of evaluation and development for the adult educators.

Research theme 5: Policy issues for adult education
    a.   In depth study of the educational policy for lifelong learning in Greece.
    b.   How is adult education related to social policy in the rhetoric of the knowledge society?
    c.   Study of the Second Chance institutions in Greece and comparison with the respective institutions in the EU.
    d.   The incorporation of adult education in the graduate and undergraduate programs of the Greek universities.

Research theme 6: The learning process: impediments, methods, evaluation
    a.   Experiential learning and groups – applications and efficiency.
    b.   Identification and application of new methodologies and participative techniques in adult education.

    c.   In depth analysis of the learning process in group learning environment.

    d.   Qualitative study for the identification of the objective and subjective impediments in the field of adult education in Greece: stereotypes, time management, and strategies for knowledge acquisition.

    e.   Follow-up studies for the evaluation of the impact and the efficiency of adult education programs in the transformation of their frames of reference.

Research theme 7: Theory and practice of transformative learning

    a.   In depth study of adult learning processes and especially of transformative learning and critical reflection.

    b.   Design of transformative learning educational activities for adults.

    c.   Transformative learning: practices and applications in the Greek context.

    d.   Exploration of the possibilities for applying transformative learning in the framework of in-service training.

    e.   Qualitative appraisal of the application of transformative learning

    f.   Follow-up studies for the evaluation of the impact and the efficiency of adult education programs in the transformation of their frames of reference.

Research theme 8: General issues of theory and research

    a.   In depth study of the epistemology of the contemporary trends in adult education.

    b.   Review of all the empirical research in the field of adult education in Greece.

Research theme 9: Innovations (good practices, technology) and quality in adult education programs

    a.   Development of quality indexes for the appraisal of the efficiency of adult education programs.

    b.   Development of alternative (qualitative) evaluation tools focusing in learning.

    c.   Action-research as a tool of evaluation and development for the adult educators.

    d.   Training needs assessment based on "secondary" aims of the educational process such as interests, the search for a deeper personal mean-

ing, personal development, development of social and political participation, cultural development.

    e.   Design of educational programs in social skills and especially in time management and emotional intelligence.

    f.   Identification of good and innovative practices in designing educational programs.

    g.   The contribution of information and communication technology in adult education. What problems are resolved and what new problems are created?

Research theme 10: Participation motivation: general population and special groups

    a.   Training needs assessment and identification of the participation parameters in adult education programs by adults of special social groups (e.g. former drug addicts, people positive in HIV, prison inmates, etc.)

    b.   Identification of the socio-demographic characteristics of the adult population in Greece who enrol in adult education programs in relation with their motives and their expectations.

In the third and final round, the participants were asked to choose seven (7) research themes that they considered most important. The results of the third round are depicted in the table below.

Table 4: Final priority list of adult education research themes in Greece

Research theme	Count
Innovations (good practices, technology) and quality in adult education programs	23
Adult educators: meaning, profile and professionalisation	23
Policy issues for adult education	21
The learning process: impediments, methods, evaluation	20
Assessment of the training needs in general and special population	19
General issues of theory and research	17
Employment and adult education	17
Participation motivation: general population and special groups	17
Adult education in special social groups	17
Theory and practice of transformative learning	15
Total (27x7)	189

The whole implementation of the research Delphi project lasted approximately seven months while the participation percentage was 100% in all rounds. The collection of the participants' opinion had all the obstacles which are noted in bibliography on the Delphi method. The most important was the delay in responding, an issue which was somehow expected due to the professional responsibilities of the participants.

Epilogue

The project which was implemented in our effort to create a priority list for research in adult education within the context of Greece gave us the oportunity not only to construct a list but also to reflect on the conditions of the field of adult education in Greece. Some of our reflections are presented in the section.

The appearance of the research themes "Innovations (good practices, technology) and quality in adult education programs" and "Adult educators: meaning, profile and professionalisation" as the most important areas for research lead us to think about the development stage of adult education in Greece. We felt that there is an intention to explore efficiency, quality, and innovation in the field of practice of adult education. This intention may be interpreted as a search for a distinctive identity for the practice of the field in the stage of planning and implementation as well as in the stage of appraisal and evaluation of educational activities. Therefore, we consider it to be expected that the professionalisation and the need for the development of a clear professional identity for the adult educators are research priorities of the same value. Indeed, the last five years in Greece two major training programs for adult educators have been implemented (in both continuing vocational education and general-liberal adult education). These programs beyond their inherent value which derives from the fact that knowledge and skills on adult education was made available to a quite large population of trainers, created expectations among the participants who know see themselves from a more "professional" point of view.

We were quite concerned about the fact that the research themes "Employment and adult education" and "Adult education in special social groups" achieved a low placement in the preference list. We could understand this rating as a dissatisfaction about the impact of the role of adult education as an involvement which would generate change in these two areas of pract ice. However, since such a conclusion is difficult to be drawn based on the results of a forecasting method like Delphi, we suggest the further exploration of this issue.

Finally, we would like to note again that this was the first time that a research project was implemented in Greece in order to inform the field of adult education with a research priority list. Therefore, the results of the study depict the trends in Greek adult education at the time of the implementation (2007-2008) and apparently they create a satisfactory guide for the future research of the field. On the other hand, our era is an era of radical changes and consequently results which are generated by a forecasting method like the Delhi technique require similar efforts in frequent intervals in order to increase their concordance with contemporary trends. In other words, we feel that the results of our research will gain more value if beyond their inherent significance they could be used as a basis for a longitudinal effort to record the research trends of adult education in Greece.

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Definisanje liste istraživačkih prioriteta od strane zaposlenih na odeljenjima za obrazovanje odraslih na grčkim univerzitetima

Apstrakt: Rad predstavlja rezultate istraživanja u kojem je primenjen Delfi metod i koje je imalo za cilj da se definišu istraživački prioriteti i oblasti obrazovanja odraslih u Grčkoj. Identifikovani su istraživački prioriteti, kako opšta tematska područja, tako i specifični istraživački problemi. Uzorak je činilo 27 naučnika sa fakulteta u Grčkoj – predavača i istraživača u oblasti obrazovanja odraslih. Rezultati tri faze Delfi procesa pružili su uvid u način na koji ispitanici definišu ključna područja u oblasti istraživanja obrazovanja odraslih u Grčkoj.

Ključne reči: istraživački prioriteti, obrazovanje odraslih, Delfi metod.

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