

## **Deakin Launch Network: An employability network that improves engagement, graduate outcomes and wellbeing by connecting and leveraging the expertise of diverse students and alumni**

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Graduates require opportunities to gain experience and develop professional networks to enhance their employability and career progression. However, students' access to relevant networks and opportunities to gain experience is not equitable, and this contributes to gaps in employment outcomes at graduation and beyond (Harvey et al., 2017; Tomaszewski et al., 2019). This paper showcases key principles underpinning the design and success of a student and alumni-led network designed to enhance employability. In addition to creating networks between students and alumni, Deakin Launch Network, leverages their skills and experience to identify and create opportunities to enhance the employability of Deakin graduates, especially for those more likely to face disadvantage in the graduate employment market. In doing so, the network provides students with valuable connections, experience, and knowledge relevant to employability. Students also report that the connections and collaborations supported by the network, contributed to their wellbeing and sense of belonging during remote learning, and satisfaction with their educational experience. For alumni, the network has provided motivation and opportunity to re-connect or remain connected to the university. Our case study shows that students and alumni are a valuable source of networks, experience and influence that can, and should, be better utilised by universities. Furthermore, distributed student-leadership and purposeful inclusion can positively impact the outcomes of student-staff partnerships, including project deliverables, the student experience and learning outcomes.

Keywords: student-staff partnership, distributed leadership, equity and inclusion, employability.

### **Introduction**

All graduates benefit from opportunities to gain experience and develop professional networks to enhance their employability and career progression, but opportunities are not equitable, and some students need more support from universities more than others (Harvey, Andrewartha, Edwards, Clarke, & Reyes, 2017; Jorre de St Jorre & Oliver, 2018; Tomaszewski, Perales, Xiang, & Kubler, 2019). For example, research has identified the need to improve careers advice for low SES and regional students (HEFCE, 2015). Graduates from low SES backgrounds also have poorer rates of employment, reduced salaries and higher rates of job mismatch than their more advantaged peers (Li & Carroll, 2019; O'Shea, 2016; QILT, 2019; Richardson, Bennett, & Roberts, 2016; Tomaszewski et al., 2019). Factors such as institution type, field of education and participation in paid employment influence those trends (Richardson et al., 2016), but alone, do not explain differences in graduate employment outcomes.

There is growing evidence, that gaps in graduate outcomes are impacted by who and what students know during their degree. Research has shown that students from low SES background less frequently access university careers services or participate in work-integrated learning and extra-curricular opportunities that provide skills, understanding and experiences valued by employers (Doyle, 2011; Harvey et al., 2017; Universities Australia, 2019). This corresponds with their being less aware of skills and experiences that are valued by employers, and less likely to have networks who can provide them with career support or connect them with opportunities (Doyle, 2011). Thus, students from low SES backgrounds are likely to benefit more (than their more privileged peers) from strategies that provide them with networking opportunities relevant to careers, or opportunities to gain skills and experience relevant to employability. Perceived employability and confidence in careers, also impacts the way in which students value their educational experiences, having implications for retention and achievement (de Oliveira Silva, de Sousa Mendes, Ganga, Mergulhão, & Lizarelli, 2019).

Nationally funded projects have generated an expansive body of knowledge about how universities can design curriculum to enhance graduate employability (Atkinson, Misko, & Stanwick, 2015; Barrie, Hughes, Crisp, & Bennieson, 2014; Barrie, Hughes, & Smith, 2009; Bennett, 2016; Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell, & Watts, 2000; Edwards, Perkins, Pearce, & Hong, 2015; Oliver, 2015; Orrell, 2011; Patrick et al., 2009; Radloff, de la Harpe, Dalton, Thomas, & Lawson, 2008). However, few studies have considered the specific needs or experience of low SES students or other equity groups, despite evidence of their greater need. Likewise, most universities have developed institutional strategies to improve graduate employability, but few universities have implemented practices or policies specifically targeted at improving the employment outcomes of equity students (Harvey et al., 2017).

We sought to address these challenges and gaps by connecting and leveraging the expertise of diverse students and alumni. This paper showcases key principles underpinning the design and success of a student and alumni-led network designed to enhance employability. In addition to creating networks between students and alumni, we sought to leverage their skills and experience to identify and create opportunities to enhance employability, especially for those more likely to face disadvantage in the graduate employment market.

### **Project approach: student-staff partnership, distributed student-leadership and purposeful inclusion**

Deakin students and alumni were invited to lead the establishment of a network, and to identify and create inclusive opportunities to enhance employability for themselves and their peers, especially those more likely to face disadvantage in the graduate employment market. A student-staff partnership approach was used to establish the network because student perspectives are important to the design of strategies that optimise the student experience, and co-production is a means by which knowledge can be shared to improve outcomes (Dollinger & Lodge, 2020). However, natural power imbalances between students and staff, can be a barrier to effective partnerships, especially where staff want to engage students but are uncomfortable with relinquishing control (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011; Dollinger & Lodge, 2020). The project team sought to balance power relationships and drive innovation by looking beyond their own ideas and inviting students and alumni to lead conceptualisation of the network and identification of subsequent priorities.

To ensure that the network and its outputs were relevant to the needs of diverse students and alumni, the project team also used a staged and purposefully inclusive approach to ensure that those who set the direction for the network included representatives from low SES backgrounds and other equity groups. Students and alumni invited to contribute to early stages of the project had already shown an interest in equity, employability and/or leadership in the Deakin Community, and were drawn from programs known to have high representation of students from low SES backgrounds and other equity groups. Care was also taken to ensure that students who were first-in-family, enrolled online and mature aged were represented - in recognition of the unique needs and perspectives of those cohorts.

To accommodate genuine opportunities for student leadership, an iterative and highly adaptive approach was used to plan and implement the project. Input from students and alumni was actively sought at each stage of implementation and informed subsequent stages, which included:

#### **Stage 1: Consultation**

The project proposal was developed in consultation with a broad range of students, alumni and colleagues from Deakin Faculties and Divisions, including representatives from Advancement and Alumni Relations, the Graduate Employment Division, and Equity and Diversity. Two students and alumni were then also invited to review the project approach, including workshop plans and resources developed by the project team. Resources included documentation to explain the aim and rationale for the project, parameters for establishment of the network and use of project funds, and an overview of key concepts of importance to the project aim: inclusion and representation, distributed leadership, and graduate employability. Consultation was in-depth and led to refinement.

## Stage 2: Foundation of Deakin Launch Network

A larger group of students and alumni were invited to conceptualise and establish the network through two intensive online workshops (3 hours each) facilitated by the project team (n = 4). Of 20 participants invited, eleven students (some of whom were also alumni) contributed to establishment workshops. This foundation group were tasked with conceptualising a network that would be relevant not only to their own needs, but to others who might not be represented. This was conveyed through discussion about the aims of the project and articulation of parameters relevant to those (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Project parameters provided to Foundation group**

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We want students and alumni to set the direction and identify priorities, but the network and activities funded by the project need to work within the following parameters:

1. Focus must be on improving support for employability for Deakin students and graduates
  2. Must be inclusive and relevant to Deakin students and alumni from diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds
  3. Must enable distributed leadership: responsibility for establishing the network and leading the activities prioritised must be shared
  4. Must enable those who join to remain connected/benefit regardless of how or when they can or choose to contribute
  5. Activities funded by the project must be completed by the end of October so that we can acquit funds and evaluate impact within the life of the project
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Use of breakout rooms during the workshops, and asynchronous or one-on-one collaboration in between workshops, were important to drawing out and positively reinforcing the contribution and development of ideas by all participants, especially those who were quieter or less confident. Collaboration in between workshops included use of shared documents, curation of email submissions to summarise key themes emerging from correspondence, and one-on-one conversations via email or phone.

By the end of the second workshop students had agreed on the network's name, mission and objectives, scope of activities and principles to guide future actions. Recruitment and communication strategies, and areas of immediate priority were also discussed and recorded. A Microsoft Teams group was created to enable asynchronous collaboration, further refinement, and planning.

The project team had planned to support additional workshops to involve more students in conceptualising and refining the network's mission, objectives, and scope. However, student leaders noted the absence and importance of including perspectives of more experienced alumni, so a third workshop (1 hour) was planned specifically to consult experienced alumni (n = 9). The workshop was led by a student from the foundation group, with support from three other student representatives and two members of the project team. Again, consultation was in-depth and led to refinement.

The foundation group was relatively small, but their experience and perspectives were diverse, and the discussion and negotiation required to develop shared understanding and consolidate views was deep and complex. For those reasons, students decided that they were satisfied with their shared vision once it had been validated and refined by the alumni group, and they agreed that their time would be best spent on sharing that vision to expand the network and supporting new students and alumni to identify and collaborate on initiatives relevant to the mission and objectives identified (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Vision for Deakin Launch Network - conceptualised by students and alumni**

### **Mission and Objectives**

To identify and create inclusive opportunities to enhance employability and advance career progression for Deakin students and alumni, especially those that are underrepresented.

We seek to:

**Empower** students and alumni to launch and navigate their careers;

**Educate** about diversity and inclusion in the workforce;  
**Equalise** access to career information, guidance and employment opportunities;  
**Engage** with communities and industry to create sustainable partnerships.  
**Scope of activities supported by the network**  
**Networking:** to connect students and alumni with each other, the university and industry or community groups  
**Projects:** to develop resources or trial initiatives related to graduate employability and career advancement;  
**Research:** to inform the development of curriculum or other strategies related to graduate employability;  
**Communications:** to promote opportunities that enhance employability;  
**Partnerships:** to foster and strengthen relationships between students, alumni, Deakin and external organisations.

#### **Principles to Guide Future Actions**

1. Guiding principles shall encourage inclusiveness, diversity and opportunity
2. Every project and decision shall have improved employability and outcomes for Deakin graduates at its centre
3. Communication shall be accessible for all. Language, written and spoken, shall be inclusive and respectful, clear and readily understood.
4. Distributive leadership shall be valued and applied. This provides for inclusivity, sustainability and greater opportunity for engagement and individual impact in leadership
5. Representativeness shall be regarded. Small groups of students shall not speak for all students.
6. Input and knowledge from all diverse participants shall be encouraged. This is especially true of those less assertive in offering their opinions
7. A strength-based, positive approach shall be applied to motivate and encourage colleagues and participants
8. Due consideration shall always be afforded to how something *could* work before deciding it *won't*

### **Stage 3: Expansion and Action**

The foundation group valued the relationships and depth of understanding that was facilitated by in-depth discussions and collaboration during conception of the network, so we sought to extend those opportunities to new members. Introductory workshops developed and facilitated by student representatives, were a key strategy used to give new students and alumni an opportunity to share their aspirations and experiences and discuss the networks vision with new and existing members. Workshop attendees were invited to continue those conversations by joining the Microsoft Teams community. A LinkedIn group was also created to provide more flexible opportunities to connect, especially for alumni, and those not familiar or receptive to use of Microsoft Teams. Fortnightly drop-in meetings were also hosted through ZOOM to facilitate collaboration and relationship building between members of the group as it expanded. Regular live meetings created important opportunities for informal conversations and relationship building.

### **Evaluation of Impact**

The recommendations shared in this paper are informed by evaluation of the deliverables and impact achieved by Deakin Launch Network in 2020. As with other aspects of the project, evaluation has been driven by student-staff partnerships. The project team assisted students to develop evaluation instruments to examine the reach and impact of student-led activities identified and supported by the network. The project team and students who contributed to establishment of the network also used reflective group meetings and shared documents to examine their experience, outcomes and subsequent recommendations for Deakin. The first of those meetings was recorded and transcribed to enable analysis of key themes, and validation and expansion of those through subsequent meetings. Insights from that work were presented at Deakin's Teaching and Learning Conference (Cronin, Jorre de St Jorre, et al., 2020), and those [student-led presentations](#) can be found on the Deakin Launch Network website ([launchnetwork.deakin.edu.au](http://launchnetwork.deakin.edu.au)). The quotes shared in this paper to illustrate outcomes, are drawn from public artefacts, including conference recordings and other videos created and shared by Deakin Launch Network, with permission from contributors. For example, this ['2020 rewind' video](#) produced by students, provides a first-hand account of the accomplishment's students were most proud of. Deakin Launch Network has achieved its three primary objectives:

## 1. Creation of networking opportunities for diverse students and alumni

Deakin Launch Network has connected students, alumni, and staff from diverse backgrounds, including difference disciplines, year levels and career stages. Those connections have enabled individuals who would not otherwise have met to identify shared interests and develop meaningful relationships through sharing ideas or collaborating on projects.

“I found it extremely valuable to make some connections to people who are in different disciplines to myself [provides examples] ...people from all different areas of the university who I wouldn't have had any connection to previously has been really, really, exciting for me, not just in terms of my friendships but also in terms of my professional connections and the ways that we can support each other in our own efforts to find employment and become more employable”

“the network gave me the opportunity to meet like-minded people from various faculties, connect with alumni and get involved in projects that I am passionate about. Through the network I co-founded the networking mindset project along with a recent Deakin graduate, who is now a very good friend of mine.”

Students have frequently described the network as a “lifeline” or “family” that provided much needed support and community during remote learning. Some students have gained actual employment opportunities through the networks that they formed. Graduates and students approaching graduation, also report appreciating opportunities the network has provided for them to reconnect with, or remain connected, to Deakin.

## 2. Facilitation of opportunities for Deakin students and alumni to identify and lead initiatives that enhance employability for themselves and others

With support from the project team and their peers, network representatives collaborated on numerous student-led initiatives, including the development and delivery of substantial projects and events, evaluative research to monitor or inform projects and events, resources and strategies designed to promote employability and networking, and submission of grant applications. Those collaborations have provided students and alumni with skills, experience and evidence relevant to their employability.

Students who led establishment of the network or subsequent initiatives, report having gained confidence, skills and understanding relevant to employability, self-awareness, and greater understanding and appreciation for difference. Some have described the experience as transformative because it has completely changed the way in which they see themselves and others.

“I have found this network a real opportunity for me to grow as an individual. I have certainly found that I've become more confident, I was certainly very nervous about going to the first meeting, I didn't know anyone, I didn't even know much about what I was getting myself into... I've never worked on such a professional level and the experience I have had, and as I have said, the confidence that I have gained is really invaluable, and I never would have agreed to present or be on the panel on an event like today if I you know, hadn't had that personal growth that I did with this network”

“...so I in the past have been very loud and in some cases potentially almost domineering in group spaces. One thing that the network has allowed me to develop is my ability to step back from conversations and invite more contributions from people around me. That's been invaluable in every space I've been in. I'm learning so much about the amazing people around me and we're able to better develop ideas now that I'm a little bit quieter”

The initiatives identified and led by students have also had substantial impacts on other members of the Deakin Community. Two project exemplars are described below.

### *Learning Partnerships Program led by Ashleigh Cronin*

This student-led project matched Deakin Pre-service Teachers with at-risk secondary school students to provide study support and mentoring. Having completed a placement with students who were strongly disadvantaged by the first remote-learning period at a low SES school, Ashleigh identified an opportunity to benefit herself, her peers and students at the school (Cronin, Cunningham, O'Neill, Cunningham, & Rankine, 2020). With support

from Deakin Launch Network, Deakin's School of Education and staff from the college, Ashleigh was able to refine and implement her project idea, including the development of recruitment and evaluation instruments and a process for recognising volunteers.

Weekly surveys were used to monitor the engagement, well-being, and progression of the secondary-school students, and to optimise learning and support for Deakin mentors. Deakin Launch representatives recognised the importance of providing volunteers with opportunities for development and recognition, so weekly surveys also included questions to encourage mentors to reflect on their skills and professional development. Mentor reflections were later used to develop personalised certificates to provide mentors with tangible evidence of the skills and experience they gained through the program. Detailed certificates included personalised documentation of capabilities demonstrated through the program and examples of activities through which those were evidenced.

The project remained operational for over 17 weeks, recruited more than 50 Pre-Service Teachers as volunteers and matched 32 mentees with support. Analysis of weekly surveys, and other feedback from mentors, and teachers at the college, suggests that the program improved attendance, work completion, and school connection for secondary-school students, as well as the professional skills, self-efficacy and confidence of Deakin Pre-service teachers (Cronin, Cunningham, et al., 2020). Students involved in the program used a presentation at Deakin's Teaching and Learning conference (Cronin, Cunningham, et al., 2020) to explain how the program supported and enhanced our learning, and demonstrated the value of investing in student-led initiatives. They explained that the program helped to alleviate anxiety through fills gaps in opportunities they had to gain practical experience through placements or voluntary activities as a result of COVID-19. Correspondence from volunteers who are now graduates, also suggests that several attribute the program as contributing substantially to their success in gaining graduate employment.

#### *The Networking Mindset led by Ben Hall and Hasan Muttakin*

Network representatives valued networking opportunities, but also recognised that their opportunities to gain networks, and their confidence and skills in networking were not equal. To address this gap, two students from different disciplinary backgrounds and year levels (first year engineering and final year law) collaborated on a pitch for a workshop series and resources to help their less confident peers develop a networking mindset. After pitching their proposal to peers in Deakin Launch Network, Ben and Hasan, refined their ideas in response to feedback from that larger group, and were supported to develop, promote and trial the first workshop in their networking series in December 2020. The workshop attracted 69 registrations and leveraged input from two guest speakers and seven student leaders to provide participants with networking tips and interactive networking opportunities. Evaluation through a post-workshop survey suggests that participants highly valued both the networking advice and practice opportunities provided. All respondents (n=13) indicated that they would be interested in attending similar events and most (85%) pointed to something specific they had learned. The series will be expanded in 2021, and new students have been invited to lead workshops under the guidance of past facilitators.

### **3. Engagement of students from low SES backgrounds and other equity groups**

Students and alumni were highly receptive to the concept of the network, and representation of students from equity groups amongst those that engaged was high (46% of domestic undergraduate students whose engagement was recorded). Analyse of 299 unique student records showed that 74% were domestic students (171 undergraduate, 51 postgraduate) and 26% were international students (35 undergraduate, 42 postgraduate). The analysis provided here is indicative rather than comprehensive because it was not feasible to monitor all engagement or identify all individuals who engaged with the network, especially where communications were facilitated through external platforms, or where meetings and events were hosted by students rather than the project team. For example, the records analysed do not include alumni or staff, or students who connected through the LinkedIn group (n=227) or Instagram campaign, because individual identifiers are not available for all of those individuals. Within the group identified, the proportion of domestic undergraduate students from low SES backgrounds, regional and remote communities, and with a disability, was higher than their representation in the Deakin student population (4%, 3.5% and 10% higher respectively) and representation of Indigenous students was equal to that in the student population (1%).

## **Key principles underpinning the success of Deakin Launch Network**

The following are key principles which have underpinned the design and success of Deakin Launch Network. They are presented here as recommendations, to encourage others to consider how they might incorporate some or all of these into their practice.

### **1. Engage and connect students through leveraging their common interest in employability and careers**

The majority of students enrol in higher education for job related reasons (Norton & Cakitaki, 2016) and share concerns about graduate competition and the declining value of degrees (Tomlinson, 2008; Tymon, 2013). Research has consistently shown that students value opportunities to enhance their employability, and want to engage in activities that improve their employment prospects - regardless of their discipline or year level (Glover, Sue, & Youngman, 2002; Jorre de St Jorre, Elliott, Johnson, & Bisset, 2019; Jorre de St Jorre & Oliver, 2018; Tomlinson, 2008; Tymon, 2013). Their understanding of experiences that are relevant is variable (Doyle, 2011; Jorre de St Jorre et al., 2019; Jorre de St Jorre & Oliver, 2018), but most recognise the value of gaining networks relevant to their career ambitions (Jorre de St Jorre et al., 2019; Kinash, Crane, Judd, & Knight, 2016). Thus, we were able to engage and connect students by leveraging their common interest in employability and emphasising opportunities to expand their networks.

### **2. Leverage peer relationships and alumni perspectives to engage 'hard to reach' students and improve outcomes**

Research has shown that students who most need careers support and opportunities to enhance their employability, are less likely to seek those opportunities (Doyle, 2011; Greenbank & Hepworth, 2008). However, peer engagement is a powerful tool that can be leveraged to engage 'hard to reach' students. Student-focussed research has found that students are more inclined to listen to career advice from their peers than academic staff, especially those further advanced in their degree (Jorre de St Jorre & Oliver, 2018). Students also value the perspectives of professionals and industry representatives, because they associate them with credibility and relevance (Jorre de St Jorre & Oliver, 2018). Alumni can be a valuable source of industry-informed perspectives. Recent graduates are also especially well positioned to bridge gaps between students and teachers, and university and industry practices (Jorre de St Jorre & Oliver, 2018). We were able to leverage relationships between students, and alumni perspectives, to engage students, and target those less likely to seek or act on opportunities to enhance their employability. Whereas research shows that online learning is associated with decreased student connectedness, and students have commonly experienced loneliness, isolation, social and psychological distance as a result of remote learning during the pandemic (Hehir, Zeller, Luckhurst, & Chandler, 2021), we were able to foster students sense of belonging and connectedness using digital tools and virtual spaces.

### **3. Enhance the outcomes of students-staff partnerships by providing students with opportunities for distributed student-leadership**

Whereas most student-partnership projects are instigated and directed by staff, we invited them to lead our partnership and encouraged them to support and collaborate with each other. In addition to helping to balancing power relationships and drive innovation, students reported that they highly valued and were motivated by opportunities to lead in a less structured environment. Positioning students as leaders contributed to their sense of ownership and responsibility to others, driving them to achieve more than they would otherwise have expected. Distribution of leadership between students, also helped them to be more confident in their decisions, balance workload, and be assertive when things were unfamiliar or where they were aware of power imbalances between themselves and staff.

Some students report that the responsibility of leadership was intimidating at first. However, peer support and collective decision-making helped less confident students to overcome their insecurities in ways that were transformative for some. At the same time, focus on inclusive decision making and representation of diverse perspectives, seems to have encouraged more experienced or confident students to focus more on inviting and supporting contribution from others. Those students also valued and were conscious of changes in their behaviours and understanding as a result of personal growth. Together, these interactions created a safe and inclusive learning environment in which students with vastly different perspective and experience developed genuine appreciation for their differences, and in which they were comfortable asking for help or accepting opportunities that appeared challenging. These observations align with self-determination theory, which argues

that students become more motivated and learn more deeply, where their need for autonomy, connection and competence are fulfilled (Ryan & Deci, 2000). By providing opportunities for leadership and collaboration, we motivated students to learn and achieve more, because it enhanced their sense of autonomy, connectedness and belief in their own competence.

#### **4. Leverage diverse perspectives, including those of alumni, to improve the outcomes of student-staff partnerships.**

Diverse perspectives and experiences are valuable but often underutilised in the workplace and our learning environments (Adams et al., 2011). Diverse perspectives and collaborative decision-making helped to broaden ideas, generate more nuanced understanding of complex problems and identify more effective and creative solutions, especially where those collaborations involved students, alumni and staff from different disciplines, year-levels and socio-cultural contexts. Differences in skills and understanding often provided opportunity for informal mentor-mentee relationships, which were highly valued by both mentors and mentees. Alumni were able to contribute valuable industry-informed perspectives and were well positioned to identify gaps and opportunities in and beyond the curriculum.

#### **5. Leverage student-staff partnerships to remain connected with alumni**

We were able to cultivate relationships with students that will encourage them to remain connected after graduation. Research has shown that relationships between students and staff are imperative to alumni loyalty and giving (McAlexander, Koenig, & DuFault, 2014). Members of the project team initially engaged alumni they had cultivated relationships with as students. Those alumni reported that they valued opportunities to reconnect or remain connected to the Deakin Community, and were generous in sharing their knowledge, experience and networks with both students and staff. Many of the students who contributed to the network in its first year, have since graduated, but have continued to actively engage with the network, including attending drop-in meetings, collaborating through Microsoft teams, leading new projects and planning for the sustainability of the network. Student-staff partnerships and other initiatives that foster students sense of belonging should be leveraged to keep students connected after they graduate.

## **Conclusion**

Our case study shows that students and alumni are a valuable source of networks, experience and influence that can be used to improve engagement, graduate outcomes and the wellbeing of diverse students, even under the most trying of circumstances. This project commenced during the shift to remote online learning and was delivered entirely online, yet it was able to provide connections that led to transformative learning and improved wellbeing for many of those involved. Recruitment of diverse students, distributed student-leadership, and focus on purposeful inclusion also had substantial positive impacts on outcomes, including project deliverables, and students' experience and learning outcomes.

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