*Original Article*

# Challenges in Reforming University Curricula for Graduate Employability: Head of Academic Departments Perspective

*Sophia Geera[1*] & David Onen[1]*

[1] Makerere University, P. O. Box 7062 Kampala, Uganda.

[*] Author for Correspondence ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8051-0910; Email: geerasophie@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT**

This paper delves into the multifaceted roles of Heads of Academic Departments (HoDs) and their intricate challenges in overhauling their units' curricula to enhance graduate employability within a university college in Uganda. Originating from persistent complaints by employers and stakeholders regarding the perceived deficiency in employable skills among university graduates despite multiple curricular revisions, the study employed a qualitative methodology, gathering data from four purposefully selected HoDs through in-depth interviews. The study's findings revealed divergent interpretations of graduate employability among participants, ranging from possessing employable skills to a student's ability to complete their study programme and secure gainful employment. Additionally, participants disclosed strategies for enabling curriculum revisions, involving, and motivating stakeholders, providing effective leadership, and offering essential information and support to their staff during the curriculum review and development process. However, the study identifies several challenges participants face in revising their units' curricula, including limited stakeholder cooperation, rapidly changing societal needs, and a shortage of funds for the curriculum review and development process. Consequently, the study concludes that while HoDs are committed to reforming university curricula to promote graduate employability, their efforts are hampered by various challenges, necessitating increased institutional support to enhance their capacity to improve graduate employability effectively.

## INTRODUCTION

The escalating global concern over the employability of university graduates stems from a perceived mismatch between the number of graduates produced and the labour market's capacity to absorb them. Scholars, including Bamwesiga (2013), Beaumont et al. (2016), and Kasozi (2015), attribute the low absorption rate to graduates lacking the relevant skills and knowledge demanded by employers, while Yorke (2006) contends that high graduate unemployment results from sluggish economies failing to create sufficient job opportunities. Surprisingly, these discussions have largely overlooked the potential roles of Heads of Academic Departments (HoDs) in universities in reforming the curricula to enhance graduate employability despite the pivotal role HoDs play in curricular review and development. This study delves into the roles and challenges faced by HoDs in reshaping their units' curricula to facilitate graduate employability in a university college in Uganda.

Historically, universities were esteemed for producing high-level labour and generating new knowledge. Until the 1980s, university graduates were readily employed in Uganda before completing their degree programs, and there was minimal graduate unemployment. However, the introduction of privatisation and liberalisation policies in the early 1990s led to a massive expansion of the higher education sector without a corresponding increase in the country's economic size, resulting in an acute shortage of job opportunities and severe youth unemployment in the country (Uganda Government, 2014). Fewer job opportunities aside, employers have been complaining about the quality of university graduates available, who, they allege, lack employable skills. Nevertheless, the knowledge and skills university graduates are expected to acquire largely depend on the curriculum and pedagogical techniques they are exposed to.

At a university, HoDs, together with deans, are responsible for, among other things, maintaining and enhancing the highest standards of scholarly excellence and setting the intellectual and academic priorities for their departments (Bozeman et al., 2013; Hess, 2013). They must also plan course offerings and faculty teaching, periodically review curricula, and ensure excellence in the departments' teaching and mentoring (Lumpkin, 2004). This scenario means that HoDs can play a role in reforming the curricula of their units to promote graduate employability. However, are all HoDs doing this? Moreover, if they are, how well are they doing this? What challenges could they be facing in revising the curricula of their units? The need for answers to these and many other related questions prompted this investigation.

The study focused on four major concepts: graduate employability, the definition of HoD, the roles of HoDs, and the challenges they face. The term graduate employability has been defined in various ways. While Kinash and Crane (2015) describe it as the capacity of graduates (or alumni) to obtain or create work, Tomlinson (2012) looks at it in terms of the dynamic changes in the relationship between HE and the labour market. Yorke and Knight (2004) regard it as the set of achievements skills, understandings, and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations. In this study, however, graduate employability was looked at in terms of the graduates' possession of relevant knowledge and skills and their ability to be absorbed and maintained in employment.

The second central concept in this study was the HoD. According to Jones (2011), a HoD is an academic leader who guides the members of a department to work towards a common shared vision, with an ability to articulate and implement the department's strategic vision in line with its institutional goals, values, and culture. Hess

(2013), however, defined a HoD as the chair of a department responsible for the leadership and management of the smallest unit of the university where teaching and learning occur. In this study, HoD was seen in terms of the individual occupying the office of HoD in the university college studied at that time.

The third concept was the role(s) of HoDs. According to Day (1984), the role of a HoD refers to the responsibilities that a HoD carries out to guarantee the quality of teaching and learning in a particular department. Meanwhile, Edet and Ekpoh (2017) opine that an HoD is someone '… saddled with the responsibility of directing, guiding, coordinating and evaluating lecturers and activities appropriately to ensure good quality education and effective department functioning'. In this study, the role of the HoD was examined in terms of what the HoD does when reforming the curricula of his/her unit to promote graduate employability.

Finally, the study examined the challenges HoDs face in executing their duties. According to the Cambridge University Press (n.d.), a challenge requires tremendous mental or physical effort to succeed. For Onen (2016), 'challenge' refers to the things (or factors) that different stakeholders in an activity find difficult to accomplish. In this study, we viewed 'challenges' regarding the difficulties HoDs experienced during curriculum review and development.

Contextually, this study took place at one of the colleges of a university in Uganda, one of the largest and oldest universities in the country. The literature we read revealed that employers were already complaining about the quality of the graduates from the same college we studied (Bagarukayo et al., 2016; Ssempebwa, 2008). They alleged that the graduates of this college lacked employable skills despite several recent curriculum reviews undertaken under the supervision of different HoDs. This scenario concerned us since HoDs in universities worldwide are required, among other things, to periodically review curricula and ensure excellence in the departments' teaching and

mentoring (Lumpkin 2004). Nonetheless, while HoDs have a role in curriculum development, how effectively and how often they do it may leave much to be desired. We felt that if the scenario persisted, it could injure the college's reputation and its graduates. Therefore, this qualitative study was intended to explore the roles played by the HoDs and the challenges they faced in reforming their units' curricula. It was expected that the data obtained from the study would help university managers appreciate what the HoDs are doing to promote graduate employability.

## Study Objectives

This research aimed to investigate the roles played by Heads of Academic Departments (HoDs) and the challenges they encounter in moulding the curricula of their units to enhance graduate employability. The specific objectives of the study were as follows:

- Examine the understanding of graduate employability among HoDs;

- Explore the functions performed by HoDs in the restructuring of curricula within their departments to foster graduate employability and

- Document the challenges HoDs confront and their strategies to cope with them.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Framework

This study was underpinned by the human capital development theory, which posits that investments in education and training contribute to individuals' human capital, enhancing their productivity and employability. Developed by Gary Becker, the theory suggests that individuals acquire specific skills and knowledge that increase their value in the labour market through education (Fix, 2018). The escalating global concern over the employability of university graduates, attributed to a perceived gap between the skills graduates possess and those demanded by the labour market, aligns with the principles of the human capital development theory. The

scholars cited in the study, including Bamwesiga (2013), Beaumont et al. (2016), Kasozi (2015), and Yorke (2006), implicitly address the importance of human capital in determining graduate employability. The study's focus on the roles and challenges faced by Heads of Academic Departments (HoDs) in reforming curricula to promote graduate employability aligns with the theory's emphasis on the role of education in shaping individuals' human capital. HoDs, as academic leaders, contribute to developing students' human capital by guiding curricular changes and ensuring alignment with the dynamic demands of the labour market. Therefore, the human capital development theory was deemed suitable for this study, providing a framework to understand the relationships between education, skills, and employability in the context of the challenges faced by HoDs in a university college in Uganda.

**Related Literature**

Various scholars' exploration of 'graduate employability' has yielded diverse perspectives, albeit without achieving a universally accepted definition (Guilbert et al., 2015; Matsouka and Mihail, 2016; Römgens et al., 2019). Guilbert et al. (2015) conceptualise employability as the potential to access suitable jobs intricately shaped by interactions between governmental and educational policies, organisational strategy, individual characteristics, and the socio-economic, cultural, and technological context.

In contrast, Yorke and Knight (2004) view employability as achievements, understandings, and personal attributes facilitating employment success. Matsouka and Mihail (2016) extend this notion, asserting that, for graduates, employability encompasses qualifications, skills, attitudes, and personal characteristics enabling them to seek and secure jobs actively. Meanwhile, Romgens et al. (2019) perceive employability as necessary for sustained labour market participation, aligning with Rothwell et al.'s (2008) emphasis on attaining sustainable employment commensurate with one's qualifications. Despite these insights, a universally accepted definition remains elusive,

reflecting the complexity of employability in diverse contexts.

The study, pivoting to a specific context, engages Heads of Departments (HoDs) at a Ugandan university college, seeking to align their perspectives with existing literature to comprehend the depth and breadth of their understanding of graduate employability. The premise is that their conceptualisation would influence their roles in reforming curricula to enhance graduate employability.

A comprehensive exploration of the roles of faculty deans and HoDs in universities globally reveals a multitude of investigations (Berdrow, 2010; Bozeman et al., 2013; Chinyamurundi, 2016; Gaubatz and Ensminger, 2017; Hess, 2013; Jones, 2011; Jowi, 2018; Lumpkin 2004; Otara, 2015). Studies often connect deans and HoDs to program review and development, emphasising their pivotal roles in shaping the academic landscape. Berdrow (2010) categorises HoD roles as actors and institution agents, outlining three primary functions: providing managerial human capital, social capital, and cognition. These roles necessitate learned skills, training, networking, and understanding organisational processes. Importantly, HoDs act as agents within the institutional context, weaving academic functions, administrative roles, and external relationships into a cohesive fabric. The study analyses how HoDs in the Ugandan college embody these roles and explores the linkages to graduate employability.

Middle-level managers, including deans and HoDs, are identified as crucial contributors to the extensive review of academic programs (Gaubatz and Ensminger, 2017). The systematic investigation undertaken by these managers aims to align academic goals with industry requirements. However, the perception of HoDs' roles in curriculum reform varies among individuals, prompting a specific investigation into this aspect.

Examining the core roles of HoDs, Lumpkin (2004) identifies three pillars: personnel

management, budgetary management, and instructional leadership. Notably, instructional leadership empowers HoDs to oversee curriculum development and implementation, providing a platform for curriculum revision to meet industry needs. Bozeman et al. (2013) reinforce this notion, asserting that departmental chairs, including HoDs, wield significant influence over policy and procedure at various levels.

Consequently, during curriculum review and development, HoDs can shape objectives, content, and implementation decisions, thus enhancing graduate employability. Chinyamurundi (2016) characterises middle-level university managers, including HoDs, as seekers and implementers of innovation, fostering creativity in program reviews to align university goals with societal needs. However, these studies fall short of documenting the specific role HoDs play in reforming curricula to promote graduate employability specifically.

Challenges faced by HoDs in executing their roles are diverse and multifaceted. Lumpkin (2004) highlights the difficulty of building cohesive teams with diverse perspectives and abilities. The recommended solution involves instructional solid leadership, which, besides fostering collaboration, enables the realignment of curricula to enhance graduate employability. Jones (2011) adds another layer to the challenges by emphasising the need to energise academic staff effectively, as academics resist rigid leadership. Moreover, HoDs are tasked with sourcing internal and external funds, adding further complexity to their role. These challenges, if not effectively addressed, may curtail the effectiveness of HoDs in managing university departments and limit opportunities for curriculum reform geared towards promoting graduate employability.

## METHODOLOGY

This research was exclusively qualitative and adopted an interpretivist research paradigm. The choice of this paradigm stemmed from the belief that understanding the roles and challenges faced by Heads of Departments (HoDs) in reforming curriculum necessitated exploration of their narratives rather than quantifying their perspectives on the issue. The study utilised a case study research design, focusing on a specific college without an intention to generalise findings beyond that context. This design, as noted by Gaya and Smith (2016), was deemed suitable for capturing the complexity of the study's object.

Data collection involved in-depth interviews with four out of seven purposively selected HoDs from the investigated college. The criterion sampling technique was employed, guided by Patton's (2001) notion that cases should meet predetermined criteria of importance. In this case, participants were selected based on their roles as HoDs and willingness to participate.

Thematic content analysis was the chosen method for data analysis, aligning with Saldana's (2009) approach to facilitate the identification and comparison of emerging views and themes within the dataset. The data was organised by type and participant, establishing the individual study participant as the unit of analysis. Subsequently, exploration and coding were carried out to develop a comprehensive understanding of the obtained data manually. This process allowed for the extraction of meaningful results.

Finally, relevant authorities were consulted to ensure ethical standards, and permission was obtained before engaging with study participants. This adherence to ethical considerations was crucial in conducting a responsible and respectful research study.

## RESULTS

In this section, we present the findings of the study. First, we describe the profiles of the study participants.

### Profile of Study Participants

The Heads of Departments (HoDs) included in the study were selected from various departments: Science, Technical and Vocational Education, Foundations and Curriculum Studies, Adult and Community Education, and Higher Education. Each of the four participants had served as HoD

for a duration ranging from two to four years. Notably, all the participants were male, except for one department in the college led by a female HoD. Our original intention was to include the only female HoD; however, during the data collection period, she was abroad, and her interim replacement was male. This observation underscores the prevailing gender disparity in higher education leadership in Uganda, highlighting the need for targeted efforts to address this inequality.

Of the four participating HoDs, three held a Ph.D. degree and held the rank of senior lecturer. The remaining participant possessed a Master's degree and held the rank of lecturer, albeit as a caretaker HoD. This appointment was due to the requirement that one hold the rank of senior lecturer to serve as a substantive HoD. Despite this distinction, all four participants willingly engaged in the study, offering valuable insights that addressed our research questions effectively. Their diverse academic backgrounds and experiences contributed to the richness and depth of the information gathered during the study.

## HOD Conceptualisations of Graduate Employability

The primary aim of this study was to assess the comprehension of Heads of Department (HoDs) and the significance attributed to graduate employability. The study specifically analysed their conceptualisations by asking, "What is your understanding of graduate employability, and how important is it?" The responses varied among participants, with one emphasising the adverse effects of generating graduates with limited employment prospects in the current era of mass higher education, deeming it detrimental to society and the individual graduate. This respondent stressed the necessity for university-acquired skills to align with workplace requirements. Conversely, another participant presented a differing perspective:

> *While it is essential to equip university graduates with employable knowledge and skills, the institutions can only provide generic skills. Specific job skills should be acquired while the graduate has already obtained employment. Therefore, this scenario means employers must be ready to train their workers to acquire the specific skills needed in a particular job context.*

These perspectives underscored the participants' awareness of the significance of graduate employability in the context of university education. Despite this acknowledgement, divergent opinions emerged regarding the skills students should acquire from university versus those they should gain in their workplaces. This divergence prompted one participant to distinguish between generic and job-specific skills.

One participant framed graduate employability as "the ability of a student to finish a given course of study and obtain better employment." According to this viewpoint, graduate employability involves securing employment and completing an academic program. Notably, students who face academic challenges, fail to complete their study programs, or graduate with lower grades often experience prolonged unemployment compared to their peers who graduate on time with stronger academic performances. In contrast, another participant defined graduate employability as "the capacity that a graduate has to be absorbed in the labour market and be sustained there." Here, emphasis was placed on the graduate's capacity, encompassing knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSA) facilitating gainful employment and job sustainability.

Nevertheless, another participant offered an alternative interpretation, defining graduate employability as "the degree to which one is employable given the competencies he/she has acquired as a result of his/her education and training." Despite differences in wording, the underlying concepts of the second and third participants converged, highlighting that graduate employability hinges on whether graduates possess the skills and knowledge sought by potential employers.

The second part of the objective was to evaluate the importance HoDs attach to the issue of graduate employability. One of the study participants remarked that:

> In this era of mass higher education and growing graduate unemployment, every graduate needs to prove that he/she possesses some unique skills or knowledge that he/she can contribute at a workplace before he/she can obtain gainful employment. As a result, the way university students are trained is very essential.

Another participant had a different view. He opined that:

> For us as a university, our role is to train the students. We only provide generic skills and knowledge to empower them to learn and unlearn while in the field. This approach allows a graduate to be versatile and fit in different work situations. Therefore, blaming us as university teachers for the unemployability of university graduates is a misplaced blame. It is the labour market that is small and fragile. In short, our economy is weak.

One participant contested that universities should be responsible for imparting specific work-related skills to students, asserting that students are being prepared for diverse employment options and that it is the employers' responsibility to facilitate the acquisition of job-specific skills. This perspective sparks debate, especially considering the contemporary challenge where employers cite a lack of employable skills as a reason for denying many graduates entry into the workforce. The study brought to light the divergence among HoDs in their understanding of graduate employability and the varied importance they assigned to the concept.

Attributing the diversity in conceptualisations to the participants' fields of study (Science, Technical and Vocational Education, Foundations and Curriculum Studies, Adult and Community Education, and Higher Education) or the locations where they pursued their highest academic qualifications proved challenging. However, it is plausible that the participants' specialisations influenced the distinctions in their roles and the efforts they invested in reshaping the curricula of their respective units to enhance graduate employability.

## HoDs in Curricular Reform for Employability

The second aim of this study was to investigate the roles of HoDs in overhauling their units' curricula to foster graduate employability. The participants in the study conveyed varying perspectives on their involvement in curriculum review and development. One participant shared, "In my capacity as a head of department, I actively engage in all committees responsible for reviewing our department's curricula every five years." He went on to elaborate that:

> I help the department reform the curricula towards promoting graduate employability by involving potential employers in curriculum reviews. I do this by ensuring that once we have drafted or revised a curriculum, we organise a stakeholder workshop to engage employers, alumni, and other stakeholders to obtain their opinions about the drafted curriculum—before we can forward it to the relevant accreditation agencies.

This perspective underscores the pivotal role of HoDs in curriculum development as they actively contribute to reshaping the curricula through stakeholder engagement. This finding suggests that HoDs do not operate in isolation when seeking to reform the curricula of their departments; somewhat, their endeavours can be influenced by the responses of other stakeholders, including employers and alumni.

Another participant highlighted his contribution to curriculum revision by researching and furnishing pertinent market information. He emphasised, "In my leadership capacity, guiding colleagues during curriculum development requires me to be well-informed about the task at hand." He explained, "Therefore, I consistently gather market information related to our programs and alumni, aiming to provide crucial insights

during curriculum reviews that can enhance our curricula in promoting graduate employability." In this context, the HoD assumes an informational role, portraying a distinctive 'independent leader role' in curriculum development compared to the 'collaborative leader role' mentioned by an earlier participant. This scenario suggests that while HoDs play leadership roles in reshaping their units' curricula to enhance graduate employability, they may adopt different leadership approaches.

A third participant articulated that his primary role in curriculum reform was to provide effective leadership. He noted

> *For any university unit to have a relevant curriculum, the curriculum development process must be effectively guided, coordinated, and led. It is those roles that, as a head of the department, I try to play effectively, and I believe it dramatically contributes to reforming our curricula towards promoting graduate employability.*

This participant perceived his leadership role as 'guiding' the curriculum review and development process, suggesting a leadership style characterised by a cautious approach. However, effective leadership often necessitates a willingness to take calculated risks to benefit both followers and the organisation (Otara 2015). This study defines effective leadership as fulfilling leadership roles that lead to desired outcomes, such as curriculum reform to enhance graduate employability.

Another participant emphasised that resource mobilisation stands out as a paramount role in curriculum development. This participant remarked:

> *In this university, getting funds to undertake departmental activities such as curriculum review is not easy since there is always a perennial outcry for lack of funds. I, therefore, lobby a lot to get money for our curricular review activities. I think that is an important role I play because if I do not do it, there is no*

*way we can reform our curricula towards promoting graduate employability.*

The above perspective suggests that HoDs generally perceive their roles in curriculum review and development as contributing to enhancing graduate employability. However, the practical implications of these roles may not always align with the curriculum a department ultimately produces. Furthermore, the emphasis on the 'resource mobilisation role' suggests that academic staff may only engage in curriculum review when providing financial incentives. Curriculum review is an internal activity that may not necessitate additional funding. Nevertheless, participants in the study highlighted the need for funds to support various curriculum review activities, such as hosting stakeholder workshops and conducting market research.

## Challenges in Curricular Reform for Employability

Addressing the challenges encountered in curricular reform for employability constituted the third objective of this study, aiming to identify the difficulties faced by HoDs in their endeavours to reform the curricula of their units and explore the strategies employed to overcome them. One pervasive challenge acknowledged by nearly all study participants was the "rapidly changing demands for skills in the workplace." Indeed, one participant emphasised:

> *There is growing pressure and demands from the world of work about the kinds of skills university students must possess to make them employable. This scenario often causes those of us who work at the university to. However, as a middle-level manager, I may not influence integrating all these new skills employers want into our curriculum. However, as experts in curriculum issues, we shall always try to modify the curriculum to suit the needs of society and particularly the labour market.*

While the participant highlighting the challenge of rapidly changing workplace skill demands may have a valid concern, he seems to overlook the

role of internships and practical utilised by his department to bridge this gap. Additionally, despite the assertion that no single university curriculum can fully satisfy the diverse needs of all employers, the participant himself admitted that, as a HoD, he coped with 'failing to meet the demands of society' by identifying and prioritising realistic objectives aligned with the vision, mission, and goals of the college and the university.

Another participant underscored the challenge of mobilising funds for curriculum reviews in the university. Constantly lobbying for financial support to facilitate the curriculum review process, particularly for stakeholder workshops and market research, was revealed as a common practice among the study participants. One participant even disclosed using project funds for curriculum reviews in his department.

A notable challenge emerging from the study was 'students' attitude towards post-graduation employment.' Participants expressed concerns about students' belief in immediate employment upon graduation despite the limited employment opportunities in today's job market. According to a participant, this indicated a broader economic challenge rather than a failure of the university system. To address this, the participant advised graduates to consider initiating their projects.

Cooperation from stakeholders was highlighted as another significant challenge to curriculum reviews. Some participants reported difficulties obtaining feedback from stakeholders, particularly potential employers, due to their non-participation in scheduled workshops. Participants employed strategies such as careful scheduling of workshops to enhance stakeholder engagement.

## DISCUSSION

This study uncovered three significant findings. Firstly, HoDs displayed diverse understandings of graduate employability, reflecting the ongoing debates surrounding this concept. Despite the variety of perspectives, the definitions provided by participants resonated with those of earlier scholars like Yorke and Knight (2004), Bamwesiga (2013), Cai (2013), and Beaumont et al. (2016). The alignment was evident in emphasising professional understanding, adaptability, and skilful practices as crucial components of graduate employability. This finding echoes the importance of knowledge, skills, and attitudes highlighted by Forrier and Sels (2003) in their definition of graduate employability.

Secondly, the study revealed that HoDs play diverse roles in curriculum reform, aligning with existing scholarship by Otara (2015), Jowi (2018), and Chinyamurundi (2016). Stakeholder involvement, a recurring theme in these studies, was echoed in the current research, emphasising the collaborative efforts of HoDs to align curricular goals with industry needs. The participants' accounts also reflected the role of middle-level managers, including HoDs, in integrating entrepreneurial skills into curricula to enhance employability, as noted by Jowi (2018).

Additionally, the study found that HoDs commonly encounter challenges in their roles, mirroring observations from Otara (2015). These challenges include lacking management skills and experience, inadequate leadership training, limited stakeholder involvement, and insufficient institutional support. Penuel et al. (2014) argued that HoDs in Western universities face distinct challenges in curriculum review, such as tedious processes. However, these are not necessarily linked to financial constraints or low stakeholder participation.

Lastly, the finding that HoDs often receive inadequate institutional support is consistent with Jowi's (2018) observations in Kenyan universities. This finding suggests a broader challenge in university settings where top-down initiatives significantly influence the experiences and effectiveness of middle-level managers. Despite these challenges, the study participants shared strategies for mitigating them, offering valuable insights for younger HoDs.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the study's findings and subsequent discussions, it is apparent that the conceptual variations among HoDs regarding graduate employability may contribute to their somewhat tepid response to this critical issue. The potential ramifications of not addressing graduate unemployment in Uganda are already significant, underscoring the urgent need for a cohesive approach. Additionally, although HoDs express a notable commitment to curriculum revision and ensuring alignment with graduate employability goals, they grapple with many challenges that must be effectively addressed to bring about tangible improvements. As a recommendation, we advocate for heightened institutional support directed towards HoDs, emphasising the necessity for targeted training in academic department management. Furthermore, allocating funds to facilitate stakeholder workshops and finance crucial curriculum review activities, such as market research, is essential for empowering HoDs in their pivotal role.

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