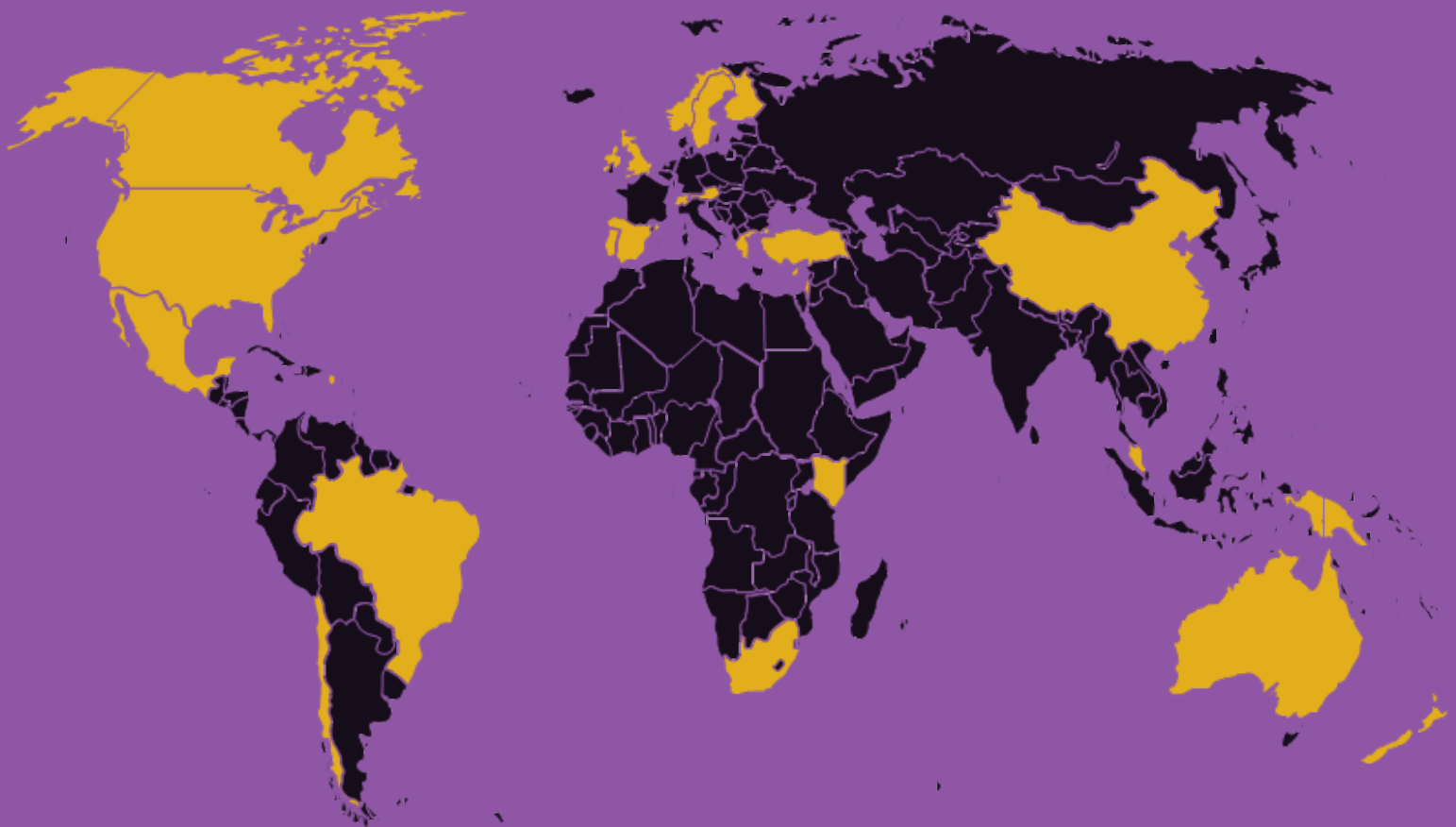




International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP): Multi-Perspective Research on School Principals



Christopher Day, The University of Nottingham

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The origins

- ISSPP began at a meeting of interested parties held at The University of Nottingham, UK in 2001
- at the meeting, it was agreed that, whilst there was much research and writing about school principals, much of it was based upon self-report, limited to quantitative 'school effectiveness' studies, which, while valuable, were not able to answer the 'How' and 'Why' conceptual and context related questions, and did not focus upon 'successful' schools and school principals specifically
- those present at the meeting agreed that conducting multi-perspective case studies of schools deemed to be successful in each country would provide valuable evidence, which would contribute to knowledge about the principalship and help inform policy and practice
- the project was the first of its kind. It has resulted in a comprehensive picture of the values, characteristics, strategies and skills of successful school leaders in primary and secondary schools in different socio-economic circumstances in different jurisdictions
- ISSPP members in 25 countries have developed case studies, organised conferences and produced numerous academic papers, special issues and books.

"The International Successful School Principalship Project is the most comprehensive and coherent international comparative study of the principalship ever undertaken...If ever there was a sound basis for outstanding policymaking it surely has been constructed in this project."

Professor Brian Caldwell

The ISSPP Network

- the ISSPP is not an organisation
- it operates with a minimum level of bureaucracy and seeks no subscriptions from its members
- its continuation and development relies upon their willingness to be collaborative, and use the same agreed research tools, protocols and means of analysis in all their ISSPP research

1. The ISSPP is “the largest and most sustained research network on successful school principalship” (ISSPP, 2019), with a membership of academics from more than 25 countries;
2. Its research is multi-perspective and multi-level through the collection and analyses of country, school level, and reputational data by which schools are judged to be ‘successful,’ and interviews with key stakeholders: principals, and a range of staff, students and parents;
3. Its research addresses not only short-term success, but also whether and how excellent student results in academic tests and examinations.

short-term success is sustained;

4. Underpinning all the research in the network is that the assertion that principals who improve academic results cannot be claimed to be necessarily ‘successful’. Though these are included in the ISSPP criteria for selecting successful principals, its research also investigates the success of the principals’ contribution to the wider social and personal purposes of schools in identifying them as ‘successful’;
5. It has found that school success is not achieved by the actions – or inaction – of a single (heroic) person, but by the collective will and work of these and other leaders and teachers, led by the direct and indirectly applied influences of principals
6. Central to the ISSPP findings is that successful principals across the world have a strong sense of moral and social/ethical purposes with humanistic values, qualities, strategies, actions, and relational connectedness;
7. Its research reveals an inclusive and diverse view of the leadership research field by differentiating between the national contexts and cultures in which principals work;
8. It has found that whilst values and principles of successful principals are generic, regardless of contexts, strategies are not.
9. Its research since 2002 has been consistent in its findings of the importance of combining consideration of the part played by personal, professional, situational and policy contexts in research about successful principalship.
10. It is informed, but goes beyond research by critical theorists, school effectiveness researchers, and school improvement development. Its theoretical underpinning is informed by ‘complexity theory’, and, within this, ‘systems thinking’.

The results

Systematic analysis of the multi-perspective case study data within and across the participating ISSPP countries has provided a wealth of rich qualitative data which point to a number of key values, qualities, skills and behaviours central to successful principalship in all contexts. These have been reported through journal papers, special issues of journals (Jacobson, Day and Leithwood, 2005), and books (Day and Gurr, 2014; Day and Leithwood, 2007; Moos, Johansson & Day, 2011; Ylimaki and Jacobson, 2011).

They reveal more nuanced understandings of successful principals’ work and lives in contexts of complexity and change than those gained from research on particular ‘models’ of leadership, and ‘effective schools’ and ‘school improvement’ research.

They provide new insights and powerful images, particularly about the kinds of reflexivity, inner values, philosophies and intra as well as inter-professional qualities, skills and strategies which successful principalship demands, regardless of culture, country and school context.

1. There are more similarities than differences among those who are successful and who have sustained the success of their schools.
2. Across all jurisdictions and countries, cultures and socio-economic contexts, successful principals are defined as being those who attend, with their teachers, to the broad moral, social and ethical issues in educating students, as well as achieving
3. Whilst the social, political, cultural and educational histories of schools differ from country to country, all principals are experiencing change which emanates from: social movements (changes in families, expectations of schools, attitudes of students) the ever-increasing interests of central and municipal governments in measurable ‘performance’ and ‘performativity’ attending to what it means to be a 21st century school including trends towards personalisation of the learning experience and teacher work as a collaborative endeavour, greater use of feedback to improve performance at all levels (student, teacher, parent, school, system), the increasing use of technology to support learning and new school building designs.
4. High expectations and a love of learning are a consistent feature of all successful principals. These high expectations are both at a personal and collective level.
5. A characteristic of successful principals, also, is the degree to which they are respected and trusted by their in-school colleagues and external school communities.
6. Principal ‘success’ is different and more than principal ‘effectiveness’
7. Successful principals across all jurisdictions, and all contexts share the same cluster of values, but the strategies to achieve and sustain success are used in different ways and in different combinations according to their judgement of context

8. What successful principals do does not conform to academically created adjectival models
9. Substance is important over style
10. Achieving, embedding and sustaining success takes time



The ISSPP: three key research strands

Strand 1: Successful school principals

- school principals of primary and secondary schools
- principals in schools located in areas of high social and economic disadvantage
- principals who sustain success

Strand 2: Principals of schools which under-perform

- principals in visible and invisible under-performing schools

Strand 3: Principal identities

- principal identities
-



STRAND 1: Successful school principals

Objectives are to:

- identify the criteria used to define successful leadership in each participating country
- investigate and analyse the knowledge, skills and dispositions which successful school leaders use in implementing leadership practices across a range of successful primary and secondary schools in different countries and in different policy and social contexts
- identify those leadership practices that are uniquely important to large vs small schools, urban vs rural schools, schools with homogenous vs diverse student populations, and high vs low poverty schools
- explore the relationship between leadership values, practices, broader social and school specific conditions, and student outcomes in different countries

The questions

In each research site, we ask, "What are the characteristics, values, strategies and practices of successful principals and what influences these?" Across sites, we ask, "Which characteristics, values, strategies and practices are similar and which are different, and what are the reasons for the differences?" In each research site we ask, "What makes this principal successful?" "How is this achieved and sustained?" What makes this principal's school "successful" that is different from "effective?"

"I love my job, I love it. It is not all hard work and drudgery, and, how am I going to get through it?' It is actually exhilarating."

School Principal

The research for this strand has:

- produced and published the largest, most comprehensive body of research internationally on successful principal leadership
- provided a unique contribution to knowledge in successful schools
- developed over one hundred cases of successful primary and secondary principals across the participating countries
- continues to build on this unparalleled and unique bank of case knowledge



STRAND 2: Principals in under-performing schools

This strand is designed to investigate two kinds of schools which are under-performing:

- those that have positive pre-requisites (high socio-economic status, parental involvement, external measures and judgements) but are under-performing
- those which have low pre-requisites (low socio-economic status, low tax base, negative external measures and judgements) and are under-performing



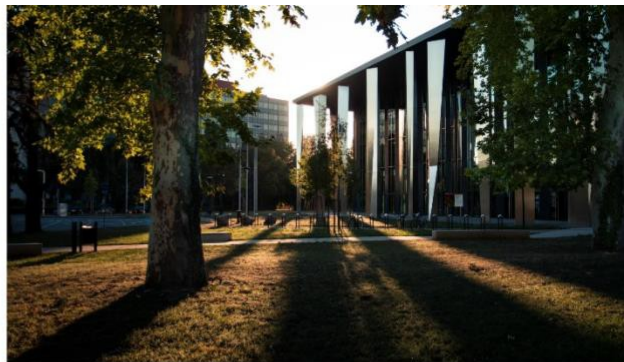
"We have yet to take a student to a national school. However, my greatest hope is that the success in this school will outlive me. ... That many of the children I have here today will live better lives than their parents, and that this community will look back and be proud of what we have achieved together."

James Chamuada, Kenya



STRAND 3: Principals' identities

This strand is in acknowledgement of the importance to the work of the principal of a strong and positive sense of professional identity. The emphasis on principal professional identities is intended to expand and enrich the work of the ISSPP on leadership of successful schools and under-performing schools. The primary options for integrating Strand 3 research with the other strands include: Professional identities of principals in successful schools already studied as part of the ISSPP (Strand 1); Professional identities of principals in successful schools beginning to be studied in the ISSPP (Strand 1); Professional identities of principals in under-performing schools (Strand 2). Other options are also possible including conducting research on professional identities of successful school principals who move to new schools. The life history approach taken in this Strand acknowledges the interaction among personal, social, cultural, and professional identities.



"Research tells us that success is achieved over time through the values-informed application of combinations and accumulations of context sensitive strategies. These are based upon the principal's diagnosis of and wise and timely responses to the concerns of policy and parents, the professional needs of staff and the best, broad educational interests of all pupils. It is the relative intensity with which these are applied and sustained in particular phases of the school's improvement journey which makes the difference. This is at the heart of what successful leaders do in achieving and sustaining success."

Christopher Day, United Kingdom

Agency over Structure: How Successful Principals Respond to Change

External changes are testing the values, resolve and resilience of principals in all schools in all countries. However:

- 'successful principals' possess, retain and communicate in all that they do and say, a strong sense of agency, tested but not dominated by policy structures. They have core sets of deeply held values and moral and ethical purposes, and immense amounts of emotional understandings of themselves and others
- they work long hours, are totally committed, have a clear, well- articulated sense of purpose and individual identity
- they build and sustain individual and collective capacities
- they are deeply respected and trusted by the communities which they serve; and are persistently resilient
- they display critical assertiveness rather than compliancy in response to the sustained externally imposed reformist cultures in which they and their colleagues work
- they display high expectations and hopefulness in themselves and others
- they are values led
- they produce academic success
- they produce wider success in areas such as curiosity, creativity, citizenship, spirituality, and so forth
- they are values-led, and both transformative and instructional in their leadership of learning and achievement for all teachers and students



Principals discussing the ISSPP process

International understandings: informed by theory

Informed by theory

Complexity theory informs the stance taken by ISSPP members in their research as part of the Network. It is described by Gleick in his seminal work on chaos theory as a means of inquiring into the workings of the world. It derives from a belief that events in today's world are highly interdependent (Kuhn, 2007). It rejects linear, atomized and predictive explanations of the social world in which we live, asserting that it is dynamic and emergent dependent on the interaction of several variables, not all of which can be observed or predicted, but all of which are connected (Cohen et al., 2011).

Researchers who wish to understand this world, to identify and unearth underlying patterns of context and person, need, therefore, to design research which enables them access to the thinking, emotional, and social worlds of teachers and schools.

Complexity theory in educational research suggests multiple causalities and multi-directional causes and effects (Cohen et. al., 2011). This requires a paradigm shift for many, towards an 'holistic, connectionist and integrationist view of the individual and the environment, rather than a fragmented, reductionist perspective' (Youngblood, 1997:34).

Complexity theory views of leadership suggest that the relationships between elements are not always rational, predictable, deterministic, linear, organised or mechanistic, but more spontaneous, evolving and self-organising (Morrison, 2002).

Complexity theory offers a way of thinking about institutions, cultures, groups, and individuals as systems. These systems are interacting with each other but are also partially constituted of other interactions with larger systems of governance (Haggis, 2008), and each of these elements (teachers, school, educational and cultural) constitutes a system. Thus, leaders are a group of people who are part of a profession, part of a school organisation that is also part of the whole educational system, that is part of a country's

culture heritage. The system affects the environment and the environment affects the system (Morrison, 2002).

The underlying rationale, as expressed through ISSPP research is, therefore, that schools are dynamic, policy influenced but not directed, task driven and relational in their nature, that success goes beyond the 'functional', and the 'personality' or 'style' of particular principals; that this is achieved through the 'layering' of values, beliefs, strategies, actions and relationships over time which, in combination, directly and indirectly lead to sustained success; and that successful principals are agential, rather than compliant, influential through how they think and feel, who they are, what they do, and how they do it.



Information

The ISSPP Network

What continues to characterise the ISSPP Network is its culture of collegiality, care, integrity, rigour and trust.

Research and practice conferences

The ISSPP organises a conference for researchers and senior school leaders to share practice and new academic and practice-based knowledge. They have been held in Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the USA.

Communication

The ISSPP collaboration process is sustained through email, telephone, exchange of country-specific contextual and emerging case study data. Face-to-face meetings take place between all members each year, and between some more frequently, in different countries:

- to share experience of research practice and findings
- to affirm generic survey and interview protocols
- to agree and discuss methods of analysis of data
- to agree country specific 'add on' questions
- to ensure agreements, for example about the meaning of 'success', 'under-performing' and 'identity'
- to determine the meaning of criteria for the selection of principals and schools
- to discuss early findings from the case studies (which, because of funding disparities in timing do not all begin or end at the same time)
- to debate the key issues which emerge and agree on future research direction
- to agree on the nature and shape of conference presentations along the way
- to design research instruments which are suitable for administration in all countries

Membership

Over the years, the ISSPP Network has become a professional learning community. All members are experienced researchers who have:

- published in the area of school leadership in their own countries and internationally
- acknowledged from their work that the quality of principal leadership, beliefs, values, strategies and practices, makes a great deal of difference to school improvement
- are all passionate at the prospect of collaboration in research

There are two kinds of membership:

- Full membership: here, there are four commitments:
 1. to use the ISSPP research tools and protocols, analyses and reporting framework
 2. to attend at least one formal meeting of the ISSPP annually
 3. to produce at least one case study in every three year period
 4. to begin with case studies of successful schools.
- Associate membership: all new members begin as associates. Over the two year period they agree to the conditions for full members. If, by the end of two years they have not fulfilled the requirements, then their membership ceases

Steering group (2020-2023)

- Christopher Day, United Kingdom (founder and Co-ordinator)
- Helene Ärlestig, Sweden
- Ruth Jensen, Norway
- Ann Elisabeth Gunnulfson, Norway (Membership Secretary)
- David Gurr, Australia
- Rose Ylimaki, United States of America

Use of ISSPP materials (intellectual property):

- the materials which ISSPP members have developed in this and the three booklets that support the research methodology in the three strands of our work are being shared in the interests of the advancement of knowledge and understanding through international co-operation and collaboration
- they are copyrighted (either directly through this project or from previous research of the members), and so may only be used with the agreement of the copyright holders

Conditions of use:

- data will be collected and analysed with integrity
- all findings will be passed on to the central ISSPP leadership team so that ISSPP continues to build knowledge of successful school principalship. We will then make this growing store of knowledge available to the research community
- all who use or intend to use these materials from the three strand booklets must sign a form of agreement and return to the ISSPP Co-ordinator



Publications

There have been four project books and seven special issues of international journals

Project Books

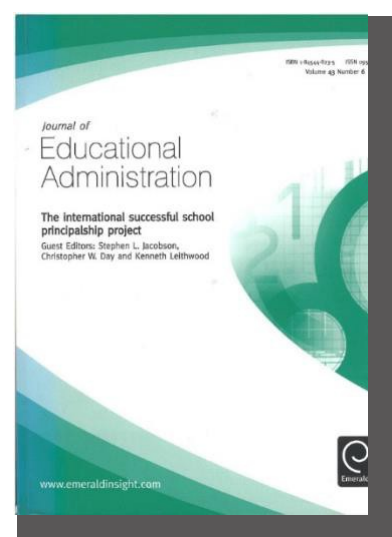
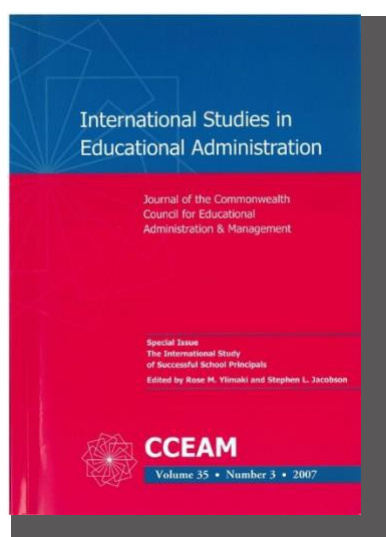
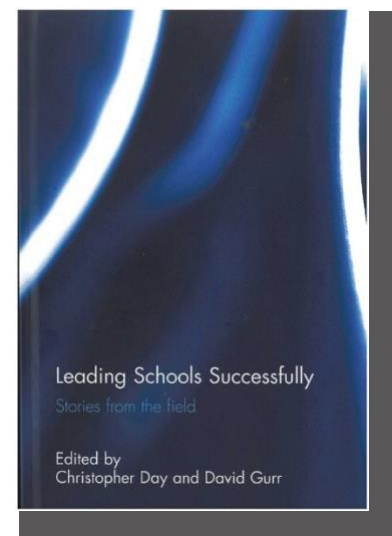
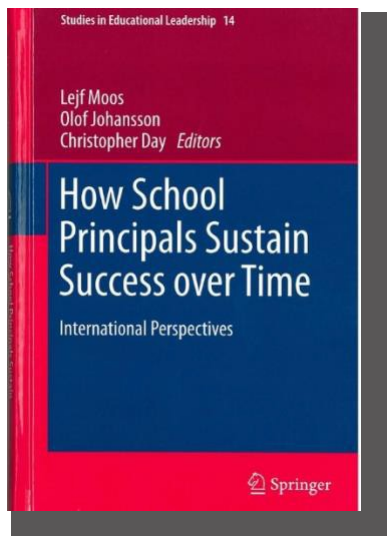
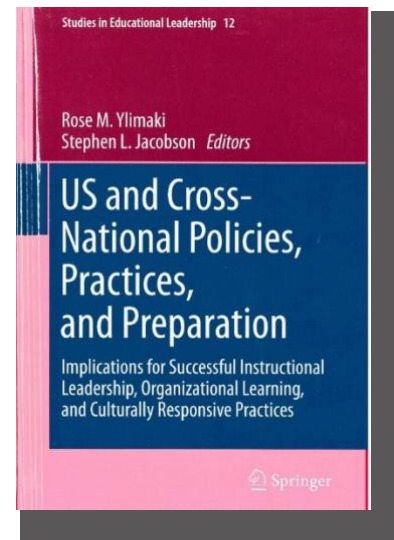
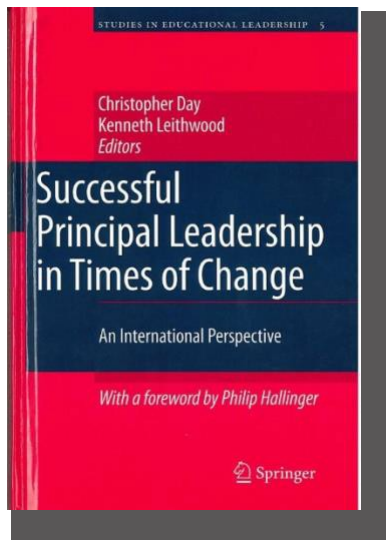
- Day, C & Gurr, D (Eds) (2014) *Leading Schools Successfully: Stories from the field* (London: Routledge)
- Leithwood, K & Day, C (Eds) *Successful School Leadership in Times of Change* (Netherlands: Springer-Kluwer)
- Moos, L, Johansson, O, & Day, C (Eds) (2011) *How School Principals Sustain Success Over Time: International Perspectives* (Netherlands: Springer-Kluwer)
- Ylimaki, R & Jacobson, S (Eds) (2011a) *US and cross-national policies, practices and preparation: Implications for successful instructional leadership, organizational learning, and culturally responsive practices* (Netherlands: Springer-Kluwer)

Special Journal Issues

- Journal of Educational Administration, 43(6), 2005
- International Studies in Educational Administration, 35(3), 2007
- Journal of Educational Administration, 47(6), 2009
- Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice, 24(1), 2009
- Leadership and Policy in Schools, 10(4) 2011
- International Journal of Educational Management, 26(5), 2012
- Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership, 15 (3), 2012

Network members have produced between 150 and 200 publications of their work in ISSPP. You can access these at: www.uv.uio.no/ils/english/research/projects/isspp/publications/







Collaborations

The size of the project (the number of schools) in each country varies according to the level of resource.

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Vaal University of Technology
Your world to a better future



Universidad
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Umeå University



筑波大学
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