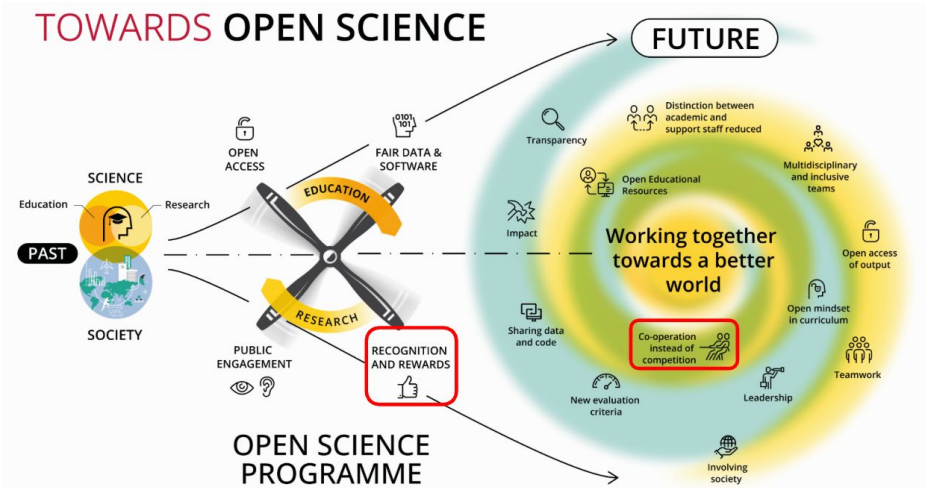
University Ranking

Utrecht University's position and steps to move away



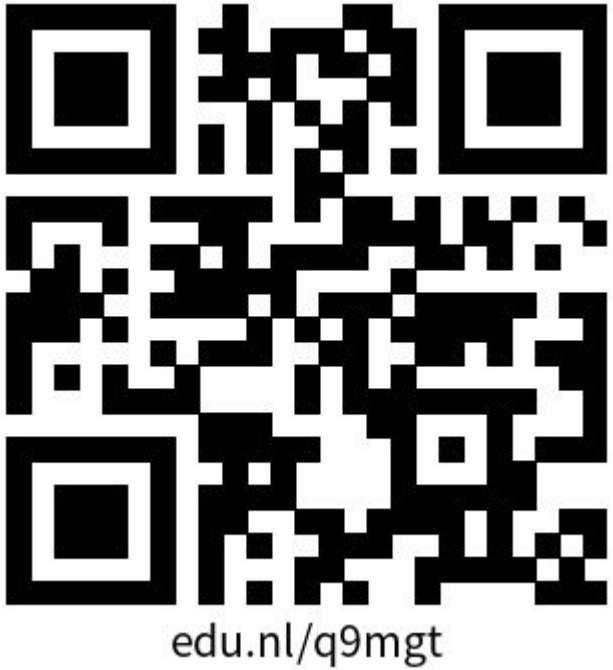
Jeroen Bosman, Utrecht University, ORCID 0000-0001-5796-2727

University rankings: what are they good for? at the Norwegian Open Science lunch 20261029

these slides are available at: edu.nl/q9mgt

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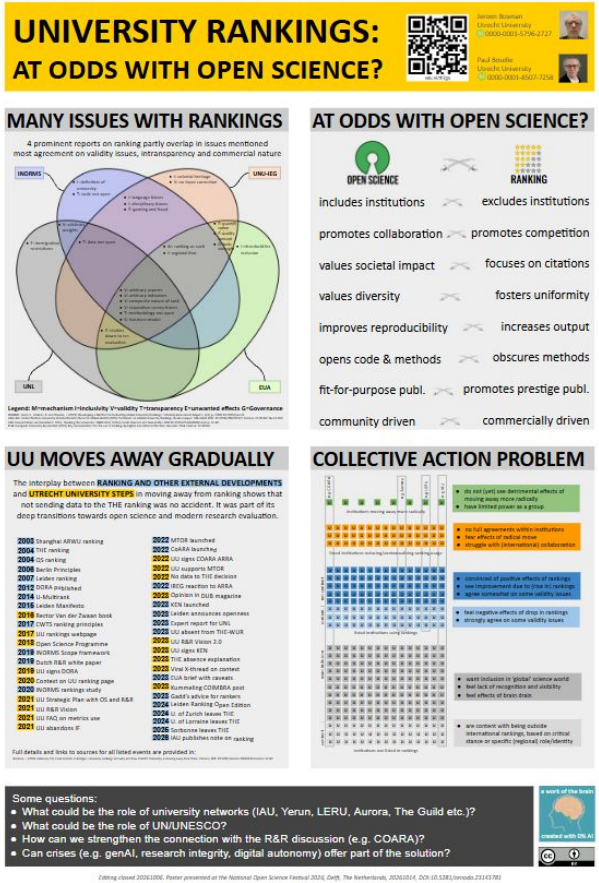
edu.nl/q9mgt

What's wrong with university rankings? Composite indicators …



Photo by Peter Gleick
@petergleick@fediscience.org

Poster at Dutch national Open Science Festival 2026

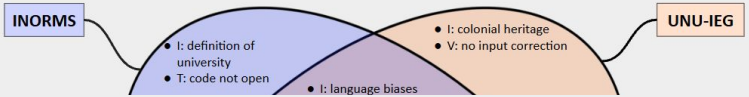


https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23143780

There are many issues with rankings

MANY ISSUES WITH RANKINGS

4 prominent reports on ranking partly overlap in issues mentioned
most agreement on validity issues, intransparency and commercial nature



- V: arbitrary aspects
- V: arbitrary indicators
- V: composite nature of rank
- V: reputation survey biases
- T: methodology not open
- G: business model

INORMS

- I: definition of university
- T: code not open

UNU-IEG

- I: colonial heritage
- V: no input correction

- I: language biases
- I: disciplinary biases
- E: gaming and fraud

- V: arbitrary weights
- E: immigration restrictions
- T: data not open
- M: ranking as such
- I: regional bias
- E: quantifi-cation
- E: quality concept
- G: lacks oversight
- I: threshold for inclusion

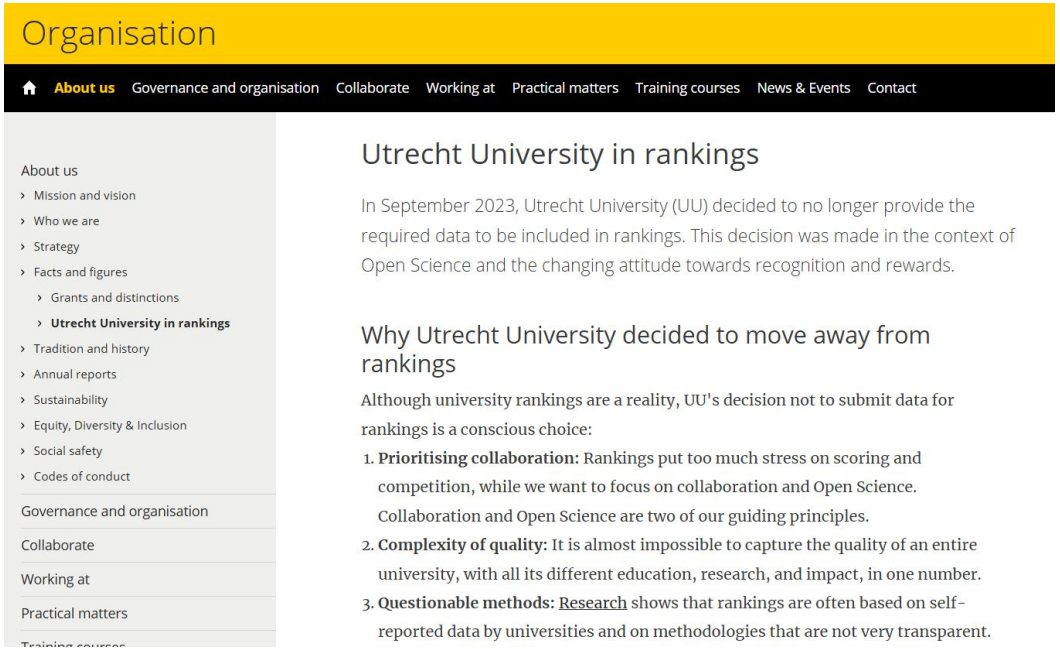
Issues mentioned/addressed by principles/reports/assessments

Aspect	Issue	Berlin principles	Leiden principles	INORMS-RWG	UNL	EUA	UNU-IEG	#
Mechanism	Limitations of league table nature		✔	✔		✔	✔	4
Inclusivity	Threshold for inclusion					✔		1
Inclusivity	Definition of university		✔	✔				2
Inclusivity	(Global north) regional biases	✔		✔		✔	✔	4
Inclusivity	Colonial/historical heritage	✔					✔	2
Inclusivity	(English) language biases	✔		✔			✔	3
Inclusivity	Disciplinary biases (against HSS)			✔			✔	2
Validity	Arbitrariness of chosen aspects	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	5
Validity	Arbitrariness of chosen indicators	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	5
Validity	Arbitrariness of chosen weights	✔		✔	✔			3
Validity	Composite nature of rank value		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	5
Validity	Focus on output, not value added						✔	1
Validity	Reputation survey issue			✔	✔	✔	✔	4
Transparency	Methodology description	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	6
Transparency	Data openness		✔	✔	✔		✔	3
Transparency	Calculation/code openness			✔				1
Unwanted effects	Fostering quantification					✔	✔	2
Unwanted effects	Trickling down to research assessments		✔		✔	✔	✔	4
Unwanted effects	Effect on idea of quality (single/limited)			✔		✔	✔	3
Unwanted effects	Gaming and fraud			✔			✔	2
Unwanted effects	Immigration restrictions				✔			1
Model/governance	Business model issues			✔	✔	✔	✔	4
Model/governance	Oversight, accountability, feedback	✔		✔		✔	✔	4

see full details at: https://tinyurl.com/laddersbridges

Issues we often mention at Utrecht University

- Ranking as such in so far as it focuses on competition rather than collaboration
- Arbitrariness of aspects/indicators, we are More Than Our Rank
- All other validity issues
- Fostering quantification
- Business model issues



What's wrong with university rankings? UU view

- **Ranking mechanism as such**
  - Ranking fosters competition: nature of research and education asks for collaboration
  - Rankings convey the idea that pursuing quality is a zero sum game
- **Inclusivity & equity**
  - Threshold for inclusion: large majority of institutions globally not ranked at all, hurting their visibility and reinforcing hierarchy
  - Unclear definition of university
  - Indicators favor global north: type of indicators and bias in data detrimental to Global South institutions
  - Colonial/historical heritage: current positions based on colonial extraction that thus still pays off
  - Publication data sources favour institutions in countries with English as native language
  - Data choices often detrimental to position of institutions that are relatively strong in humanities
- **Validity**
  - Arbitrariness of chosen aspects: publications, prizes, foreign students, reputation etc.
  - Arbitrariness of chosen indicators: use easily available data (streetlight effect) that are often bad proxies
  - Arbitrariness of chosen weights: no justification
  - Composite nature of rank value: adding up apples and oranges; disregarding institutional differences
  - Measures output, not value added: favors rich, selective institutions, reinforces inequalities
  - Questionable reputation survey: the measure influences what is to be measured (circularity)
- **Transparency**
  - A full description of methodology is often lacking
  - Data often not open: makes verification hard, no way to check contribution of each indicator to overall position
  - Calculation/code often not open: makes composite result somewhat of a black box
- **Effects**
  - Overly stimulates quantification
  - Ranking based strategic decisions lead to uniformity among institutions instead of diversity
  - Distorts idea of quality: the measure becomes the goal, institutions chase ranking positions
  - Publish or perish effect at institutional level
  - Influences strategic decisions: e.g. mergers
  - Gaming and fraud, e.g. false primary affiliations
  - Feeds into exclusionist immigration policies
  - Makes students see education as reputational investment
  - Trickling down to departmental of individual research assessments
- **Business model and governance**
  - Cost: time investment for institutions/academics to deliver data and stimulate recommendations from colleagues
  - Dependence: some rankers also provide costly consultancy on how to rise in the ranking and on marketing
  - There is no independent oversight and often very limited stakeholder governance

= explicitly mentioned in the UU decision to withdraw from THE ranking

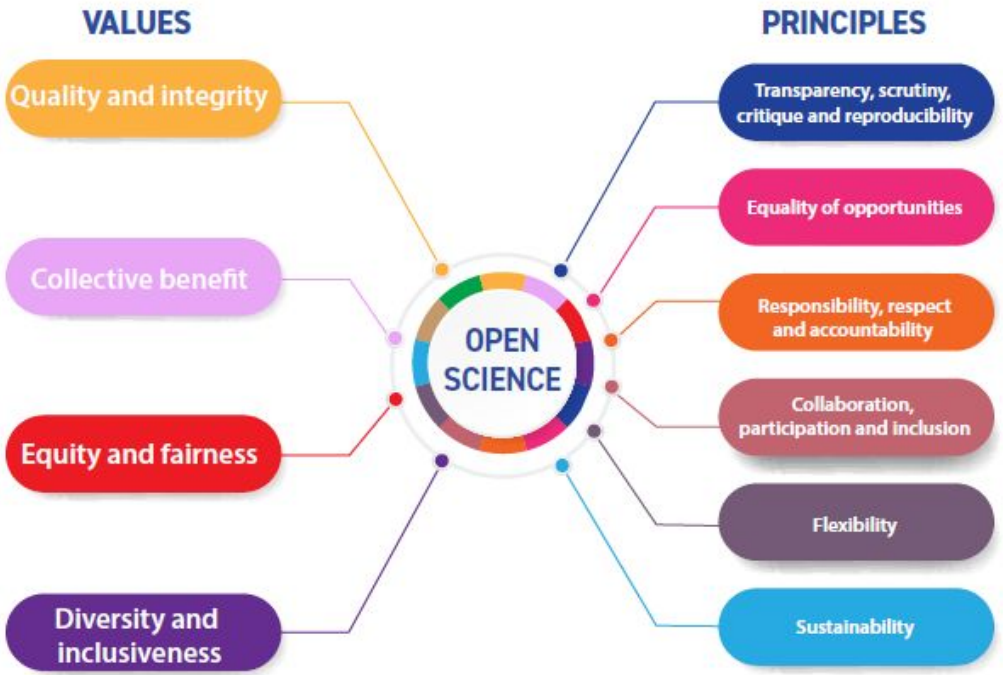
= at odds with (other) UU policies and goals

University Rankings are at odds with idea of Open Science

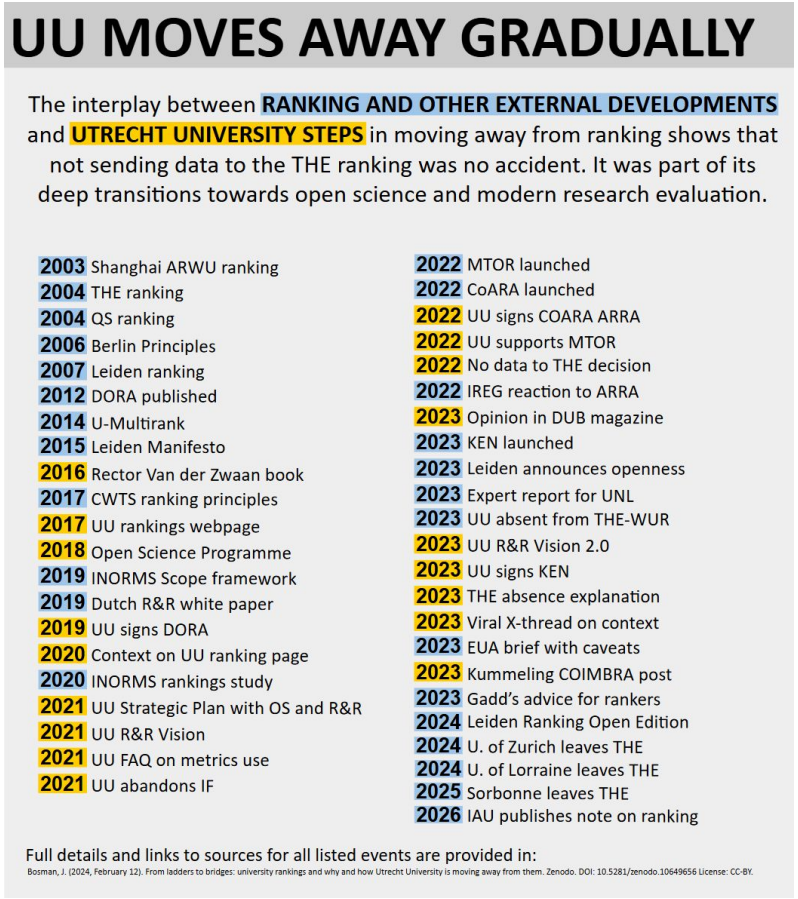
AT ODDS WITH OPEN SCIENCE?

OPEN SCIENCE	RANKING
includes institutions	excludes institutions
promotes collaboration	promotes competition
values societal impact	focuses on citations
values diversity	fosters uniformity
improves reproducibility	increases output
opens code & methods	obscures methods
fit-for-purpose publ.	promotes prestige publ.
community driven	commercially driven

including being at odds with values and principles in the UNESCO recommendation



Utrecht University is moving away *gradually*

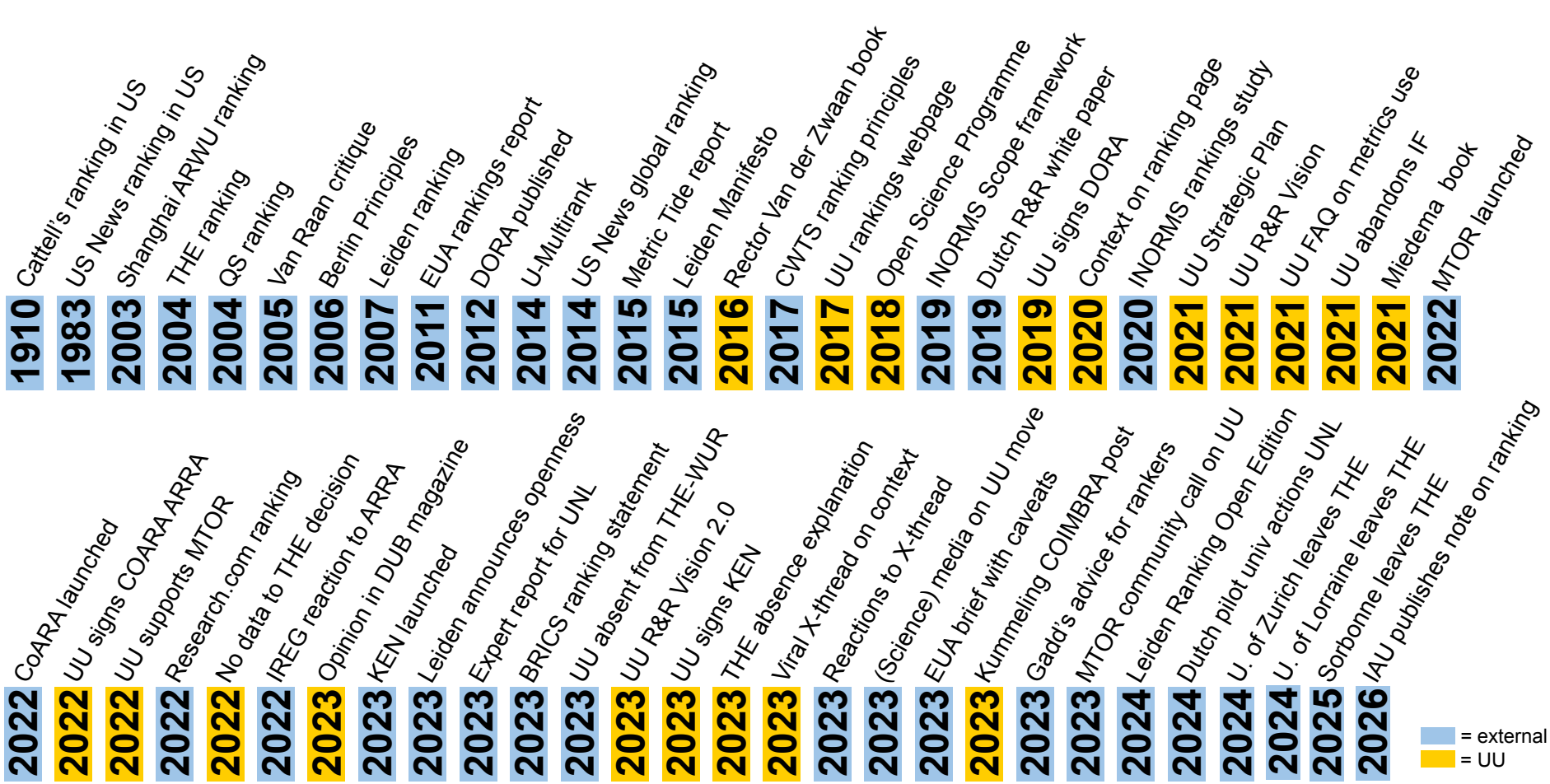


The interplay between **RANKING AND OTHER EXTERNAL DEVELOPMENTS** and **UTRECHT UNIVERSITY STEPS** in moving away from ranking shows that not sending data to the THE ranking was no accident. It was part of its deep transitions towards open science and modern research evaluation.

Not collaborating with a specific (THE) ranking is the most visible step, but for us really just one step on a path were we take other steps:

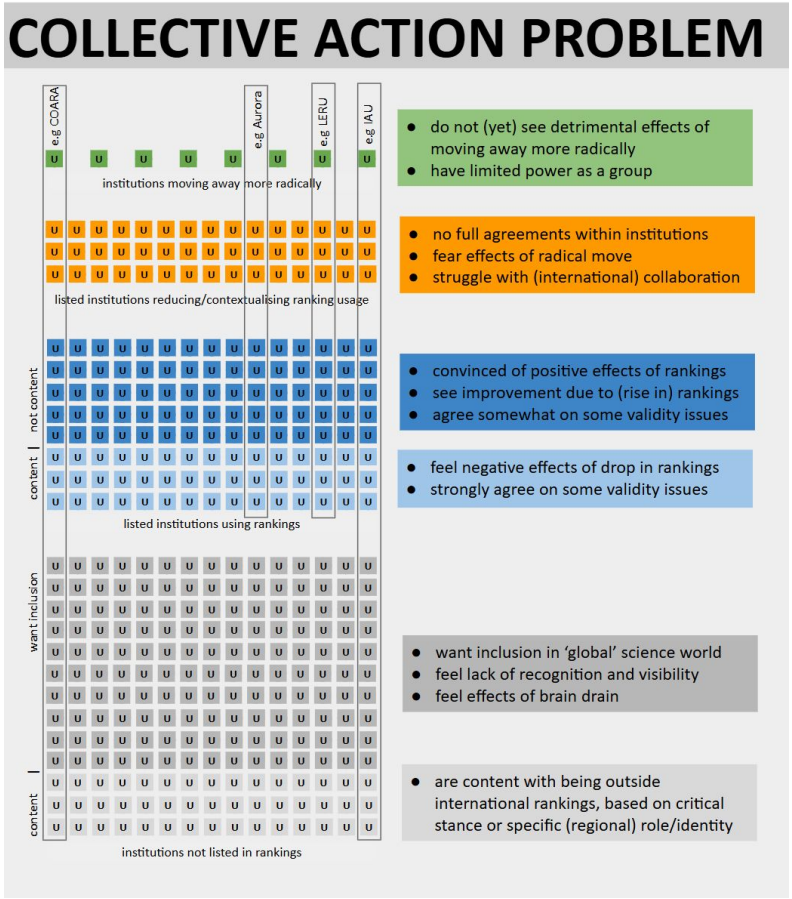
- signing DORA
- creating and implementing R&R policy
- abondoning Impact Factors
- signing COARA ARRA
- becoming KEN member (knowledge equity)

Timeline: overview of university ranking developments, UU and external



see full details at: https://tinyurl.com/laddersbridges

The collective action problem

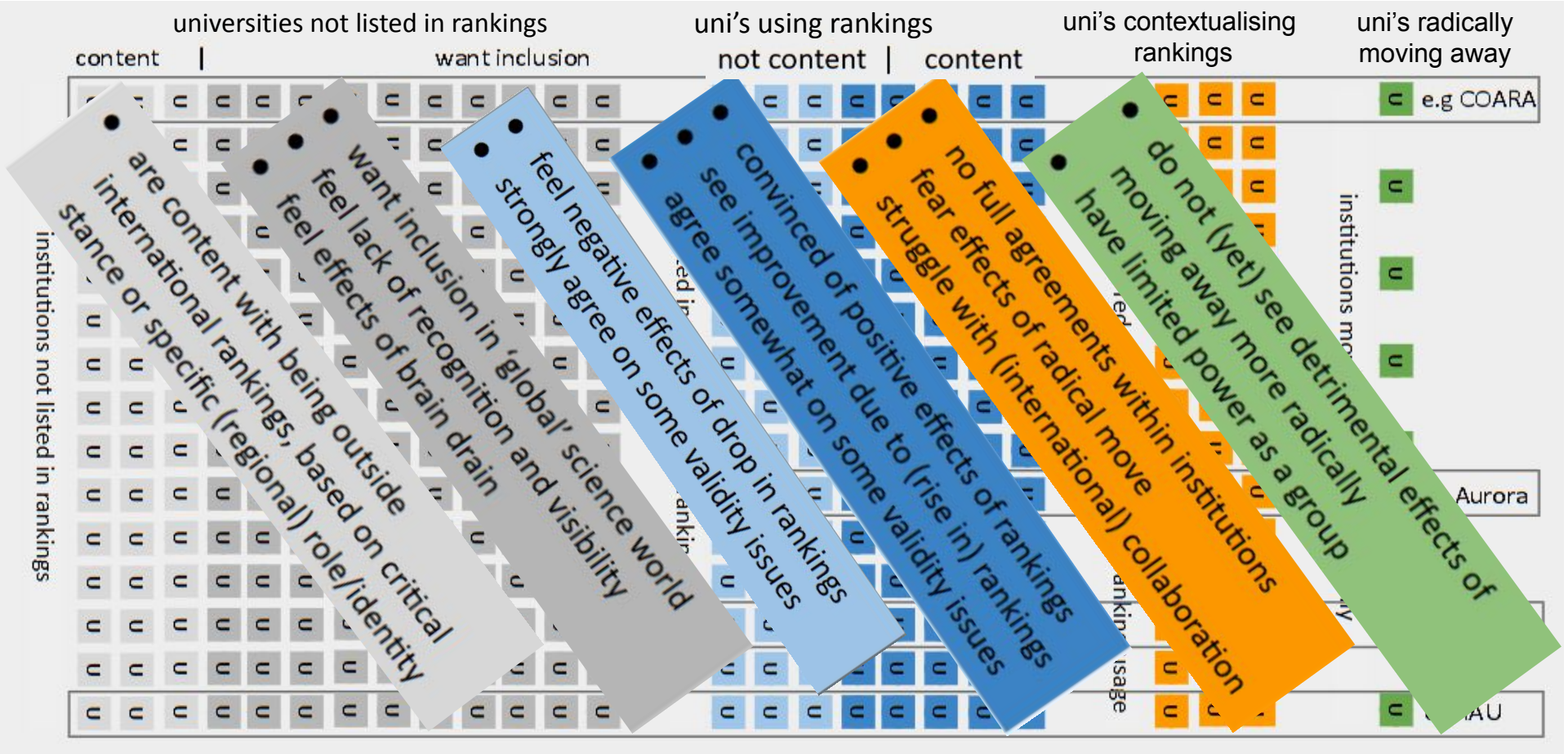


A **collective action problem** or **social dilemma** is a situation in which all individuals would be better off cooperating but fail to do so because of conflicting interests between individuals that discourage joint action.

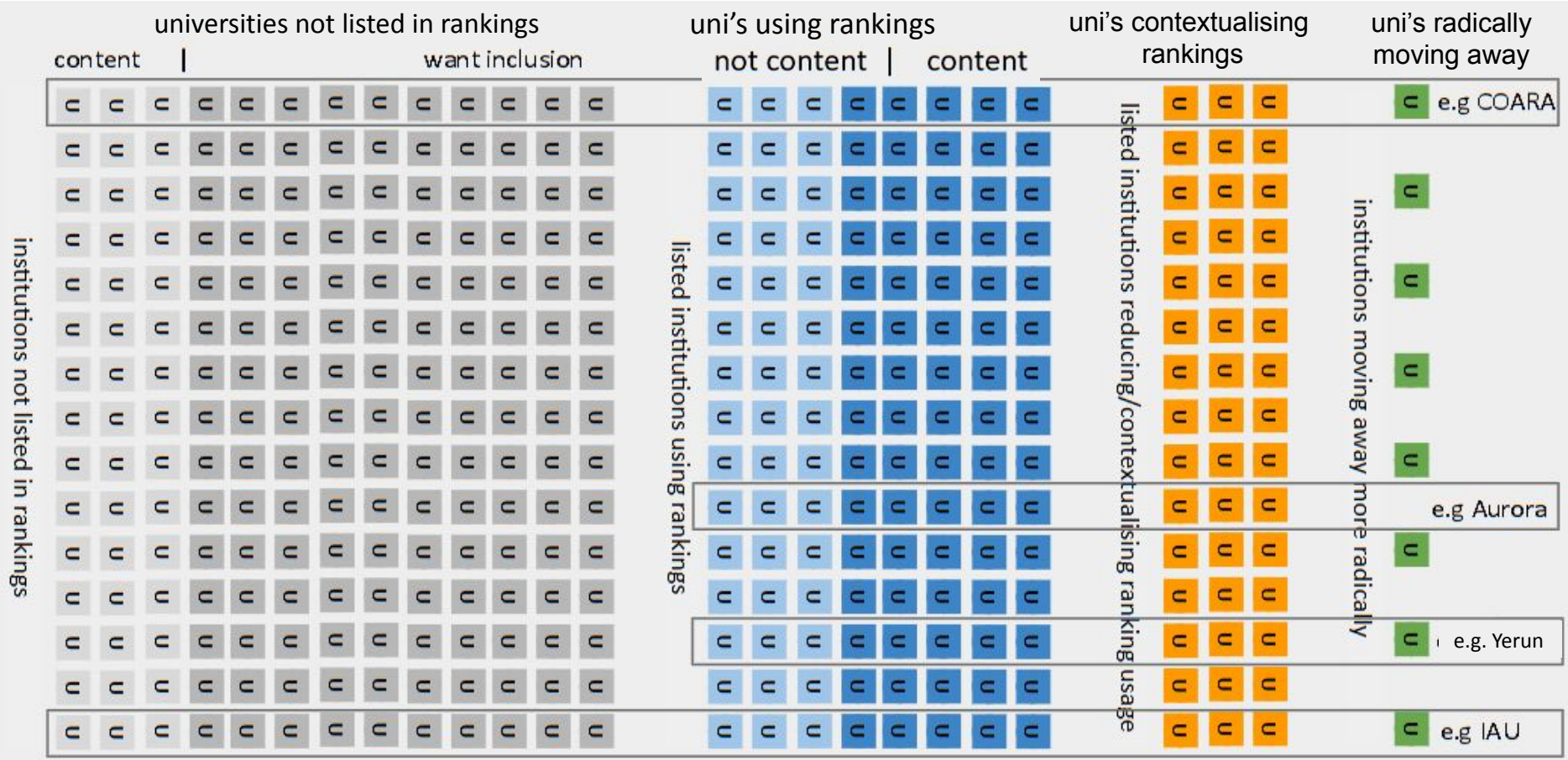
Problems arise when too many group members choose to pursue individual profit and immediate satisfaction rather than behave in the group's best long-term interests.

from Wikipedia:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective_action_problem.
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There are many issues with rankings



There are many issues with rankings



A role for international university networks?

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITIES
ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONALE DES UNIVERSITÉS

IAU Note on Rankings

Note in Support of the Report of the UNU-Convened Independent Expert Group on Global University Rankings

Since their first appearance in the early years of this century, global university rankings have grown more numerous and their influence over strategic assessment and planning within higher education and research institutions around the world has become profound. So deeply are rankings infused into the everyday life of universities that it can seem as if they are now an inextricable part of the higher education and research ecosystem.

December 18, 2024

YERUN endorsement of the "More Than Our Rank" initiative

BE SOCIAL & SHARE

more than our rank

YERUN believes that the current ranking systems suffer from systemic, fundamental challenges. These include methodological inconsistencies, lack of transparency, and an overemphasis on research output and reputation. They also fail to acknowledge and highlight the greater diversity of the European university landscape. Such limitations not only misrepresent institutional impact but, on some occasions, can also unduly influence governmental strategies and funding allocations.

A role for national university associations?

2023-6

UNL Ranking expert group report

published, with reaction by UNL

source (CC-BY): https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/files/publications/Ranking_the_university_ENG.pdf



Dutch experts give the association of universities nuanced advise on rankings

Administrative response from the Universities of The Netherlands (UNL)

Selected quotes:

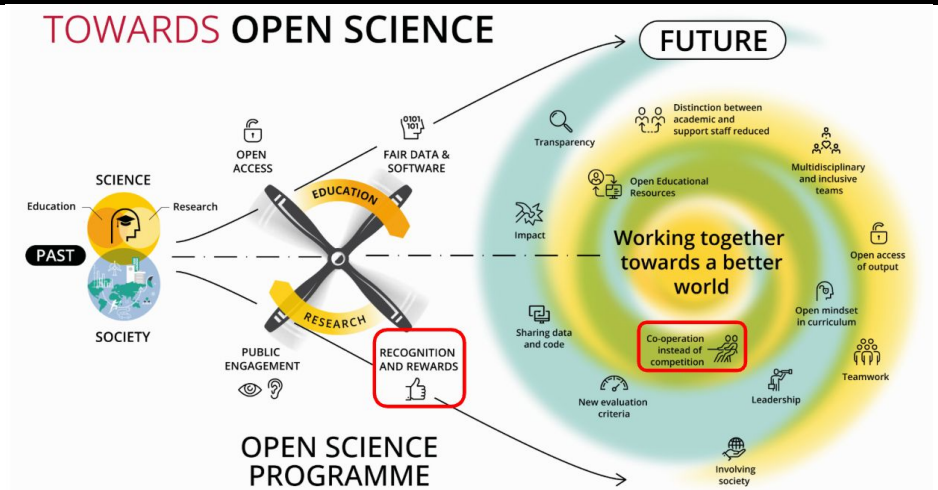
"The UNL board endorses the analysis that the use of league tables is problematic and largely embraces the recommendations put forth in the expert group's paper"

"Dutch universities will therefore begin taking steps to achieve a culture change in the use of league table rankings."

	Use of *league tables*	Communication about *league tables*	Collaboration with *league tables*	Alternatives to *league tables*
Institutional level (short term)	Use league tables for marketing purposes only, and be honest about their limitations Do not use league tables in evaluations, for budget allocation purposes and in other policy contexts (in line with CoARA)	Support the More Than Our Rank initiative and actively promote it both within your own university and externally	Make sure that data supplied to league tables are openly available (in line with the Open Research Information Agenda)	Contribute to alternatives to league tables (such as U-Multirank) by providing data and exploring opportunities to use these alternatives, e.g., for marketing purposes
National level (medium term)	Discourage the use of league tables by government organisations such as the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND)	Join forces with other universities in communicating about league tables instead of competing with them Approach media organisations to create more awareness of the problems associated with league tables	Do not make email addresses available to league tables for the purpose of their surveys Do not use tools and consultancy services offered by league tables	
International (European) level (longer term)	End the use of non-transparent league tables, including for marketing purposes; use league tables only if they are fully transparent	Publish a joint broadly supported statement on the problems associated with league tables, for example in the EUA context	Stop supplying data to non-transparent league tables; only supply data to league tables that are fully transparent	Support the development of open multidimensional alternatives to league tables, e.g., in a European context

University Ranking

Utrecht University's position and steps to move away



Jeroen Bosman, Utrecht University, ORCID 0000-0001-5796-2727

University rankings: what are they good for? (Norwegian Open Science lunch) 20261029

these slides are available at: edu.nl/q9mgt

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Overview of 8 global university rankings (updated 202402)

name	Shanghai (ARWU)	QS WUR	THE WUR	LEIDEN	LEIDEN OPEN ED.	U-MULTIRANK	US NEWS	WEBOMETRICS
launch (global edition)	2003	2004	2004	2007	2024	2014	2014	2004
origin	China	United Kingdom	United Kingdom	Netherlands	Netherlands	international (European)	United States	Spain
pub month	August	June	September	June	Februari	June	September	January & July
business model	for-profit?	for profit	for profit	not-for-profit	not-for-profit	not-for-profit	for profit	not-for-profit
owner	ShanghaiRanking Consultancy	Quacquarelli Symonds Limited	THE - Times Higher Education	CWTS (Leiden University)	CWTS (Leiden University)	consortium (CHEPS / CHE / CWTS / CYD)	U.S. News & World Report L.P.	Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas
# universities at launch	500	?	200 (2011)	500 (2011)	1411	850	500	?
# universities in 2023 pub	1000	1500	2673	1411	1411 (2024)	2202 (in 2022)	2165	12005 (global list)
requires inst. data supply	no (optional)	optional	yes	no	no	optional	no	no
uses reputation survey	no	yes (45%)	yes (33%	no	no	no	yes (25%)	no
uses composite overall metric	yes	yes	yes	no	no	no	yes	yes
archived editions	yes, from 2003	yes, 4 years	yes, from 2011	yes, from 2011	expected, from 2024	no	no	no
open license for data	none	CC-BY-NC-ND	none	none	CC0	none	none	CC-BY-NC-ND
selling ranking data analytics	no	yes	yes	no	no	no	no	no
selling ranking consultancy	no	yes	yes	no	no	no	no	no
field listings	yes, 55	yes, 54	yes, 11	yes, 5	yes, 5	yes, 30	yes, 47	no
provides additional regional/country listing	yes, 1	yes, 13	yes, 4	no	no	no	yes, 6	yes, 19
methodology link	methodology ARWU	methodology QS	methodology THE	methodology LEI	methodology LEI OE	methodology Multi	methodology USN	methodology Webo
bibliometrics source	Clarivate (WoS)	Elsevier (Scopus)	Elsevier (Scopus)	Clarivate (WoS)	OpenAlex (Our Research)	Clarivate (WoS)	Clarivate (WoS)	Scopus (via Scimago)
entry criteria	Nobel|Field; Highly Cited; Nature|Science papers	T20% academic reputation	1000 articles per 5 years; supply data	800 WoS articles per 4 years, in 'core' journals	Inclusion in (classic) Leiden Ranking	registration; supply data?	Reputation top 250 + 1250 articles/5 years	none
sortable by	**composite**; alumni prizes; country	**composite**; ac reputation; empl. reputation; fac/st ratio;cit/fac; int. fac.	**composite**; stud; stud/staff; int. stud.; female/male; interdisc; 5 more	scientific impact; collaboration; open access; gender of pub authors	scientific impact; collaboration; open access	stud/staff; doct staff; pubs; citations; private inc; int orient.; int. pubs; regional pub collab	**composite**; enrollment	**composite**; impact; openness; excellence