

# University Rankings: what's the problem & what can we do about it?

Dr Elizabeth Gadd

Chair, INORMS Research Evaluation Group

Vice-Chair, CoARA



Times Higher Education

Rankings



ARTU



WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKINGS



Round University Ranking is a ranking



SHANGHAI RANKING



# Government-run university excellence initiatives

- ▶ Taiwan *“Development plan for world class universities and research centers of excellence”*
- ▶ Russia *“Academic Excellence Initiative” Project 5-100*
- ▶ China *“Double First Class Initiative” 42 world-class HEIs by 2050*
- ▶ Japan *“Top Global University Project”*

# Government sanctioned university mergers

nature.com/articles/d41586-020-03004-x

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nature > news > article

NEWS | 27 October 2020 | Correction 03 November 2020

### How France overcame the odds to build a research mega-campus

The huge Paris–Saclay University has earned a top international ranking – but whether the model is a success.

FINANCIAL REVIEW

Work & Careers Education University

### Two SA universities look to merge and create top 100 contender

**Julie Hare** Education editor

Dec 7, 2022 – 9:53pm

South Australia's two largest universities have formally agreed to investigate a full merger, with the new institution to be operational by January 2026 if all goes to plan.

## SCIENCE | BUSINESS

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### Romania kicks off debate on university mergers after falling out of Shanghai ranking

22 Aug 2023 | News

Some university heads are saying the country should follow the French model of consolidation after the only university to have featured in the research-focused ranking drops out

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## The West Australian

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EXCLUSIVE

### Experts warn failure to consider merging all four WA universities could leave institutions out in the cold

**Bethany Hiatt** | The West Australian  
Tue, 28 February 2023 1:08AM | Comments

Bethany Hiatt

Failing to consider mergers could leave [WA universities](#) out in the cold as bigger institutions climb higher on academic world rankings, experts have warned.

Business leader and former University of Western Australia chancellor Michael Channon

### CAMPUS MORNING MAIL

Hard Facts and Insider Analysis from Stephen Matchett

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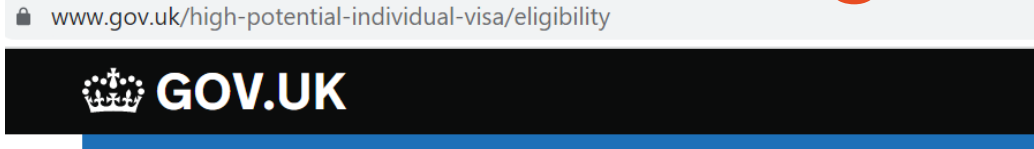
January 22, 2023  
Feature Story

in twitter email

## Research ranking case for "Adelaide University"

a merged Uni Adelaide and Uni SA should rise at least 15 places in the shorter term

# Government decision-making



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## High Potential Individual (HPI) visa

### Eligibility

To be eligible for a High Potential Individual (HPI) visa, you must have been awarded a qualification by an eligible university.

### Where you studied

The list of eligible universities is based on rankings of universities from around the world.



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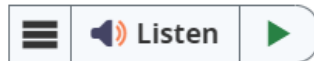
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citations to date

25

Altmetric



Articles

# Do rankings affect universities' financial sustainability? – financial vulnerability to rankings and elite status as a positional good

Roxana-Diana Baltaru , Radu-Dragomir Manac & Miruna-Daniela Ivan

Pages 2323-2335 | Published online: 28 Apr 2022

organisational data on 102 English universities from 2008 to 2017, we find that the rank a university occupies in league tables affects all universities except elite universities, controlling for previous level of financial sustainability and institutional level differences. We further show that this relationship is partly explained by universities' income from tuition fees. The findings document universities' financial vulnerability to rankings in quasi-markets

# Investment in ranking improvement

## Rankings Assistant



Recruiter	<a href="#">DURHAM UNIVERSITY</a>
Location	Durham (County) (GB)
Salary	£18852 - £20092 per annum
Posted	15 Jul 2022
End of advertisement period	05 Aug 2022
Ref	22001052
Academic Discipline	<a href="#">Business &amp; Economics,</a> <a href="#">Business &amp; Management</a>
Job Type	<a href="#">Professional Services,</a> <a href="#">Administrative</a>
Contract Type	<a href="#">Fixed Term</a>

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### Durham University Business School

Dynamic and vibrant, Durham University Business School is one of Durham University's four Faculties and is comprised of three research-intensive departments: Accounting, Economics and Finance, and Management and Marketing. Known for its global reputation, its impact on policy and practice and its strong focus on ethics, responsibility and sustainability, the School aims to be a leading European business school with a strong global presence by 2027.

The School currently has 180 academic and teaching staff, with plans and resource commitments to grow to 230 by 2027. The School has a high-quality portfolio of programmes at undergraduate, masters and doctoral level, across all subject areas. The school's student population is around 4000, across undergraduate, postgraduate and research programmes, attracting a talented and diverse student intake (with over 130 nationalities).

Our vision is to lead business thought and practice to improve global wealth and well-being. Our associated mission is to create, share and use knowledge to deliver equitable and sustainable futures around



# Gaming...and cheating

Science

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NEWS FOCUS CITATION IMPACT

## Saudi Universities Offer Cash in Exchange for Academic Prestige

YUDHIJIT BHATTACHARJEE [Authors Info & Affiliations](#)

SCIENCE • 9 Dec 2011 • Vol 334, Issue 6061 • pp. 1344-1345 • DOI: 10.1126/science.334.6061.1344

643



IN THE RACE TO MAKE A SUSTAINABLE WORLD

# University World News

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## New rankings results show how some are gaming the system

Angel Calderon 12 June 2020

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## US News college ranking under scrutiny after Ivy League university plummets


This article is more than 6 months old

Reliability of data used to compile influential list in doubt after Columbia University drops from second to 18th place

Gloria Oladipo in New York

@gaoladipo

Tue 13 Sep 2022 18.01 BST

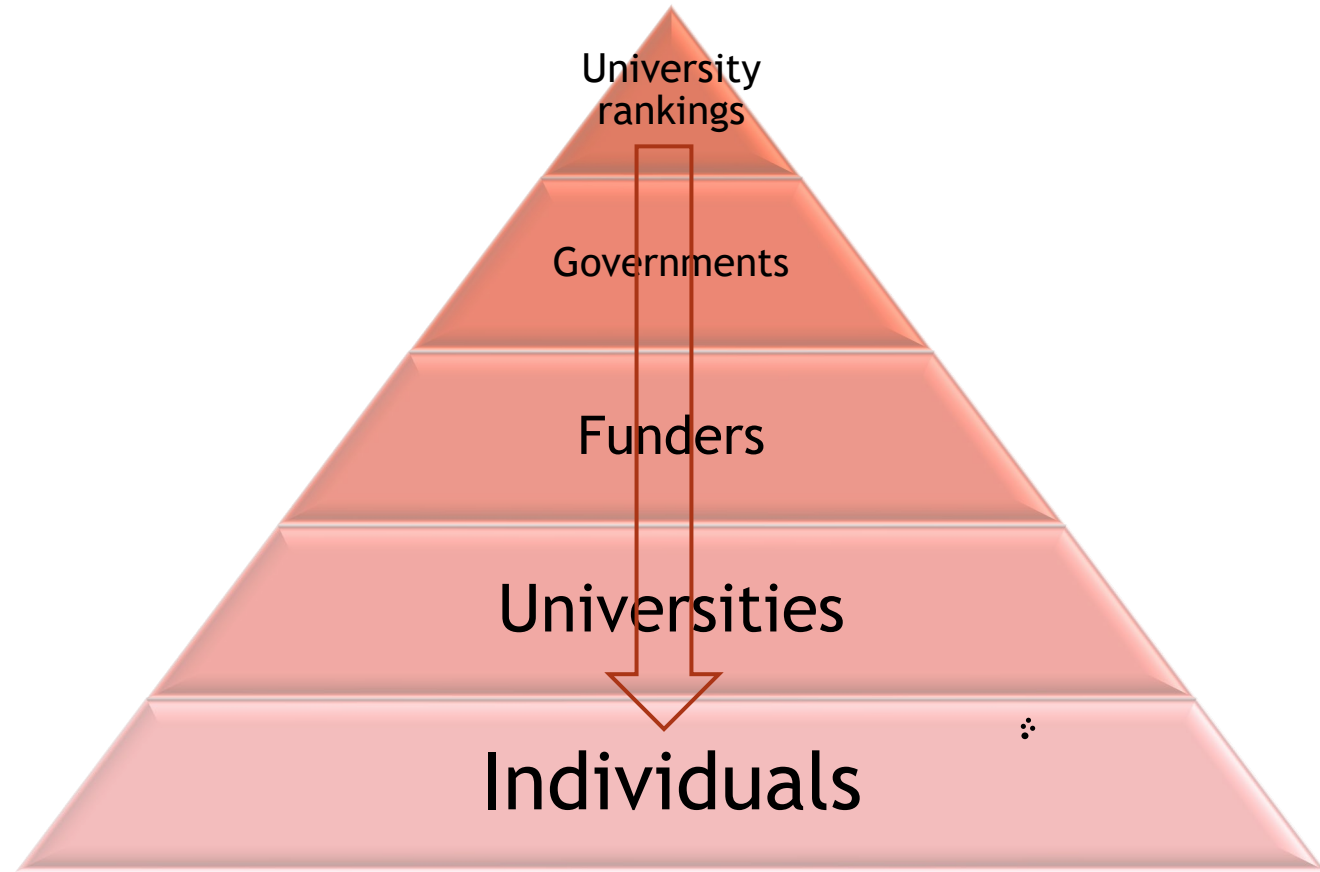


University Rankings released on 10  
d across 80 countries.

ings that is released in the



# Trickle-down effect



# CoARA Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment

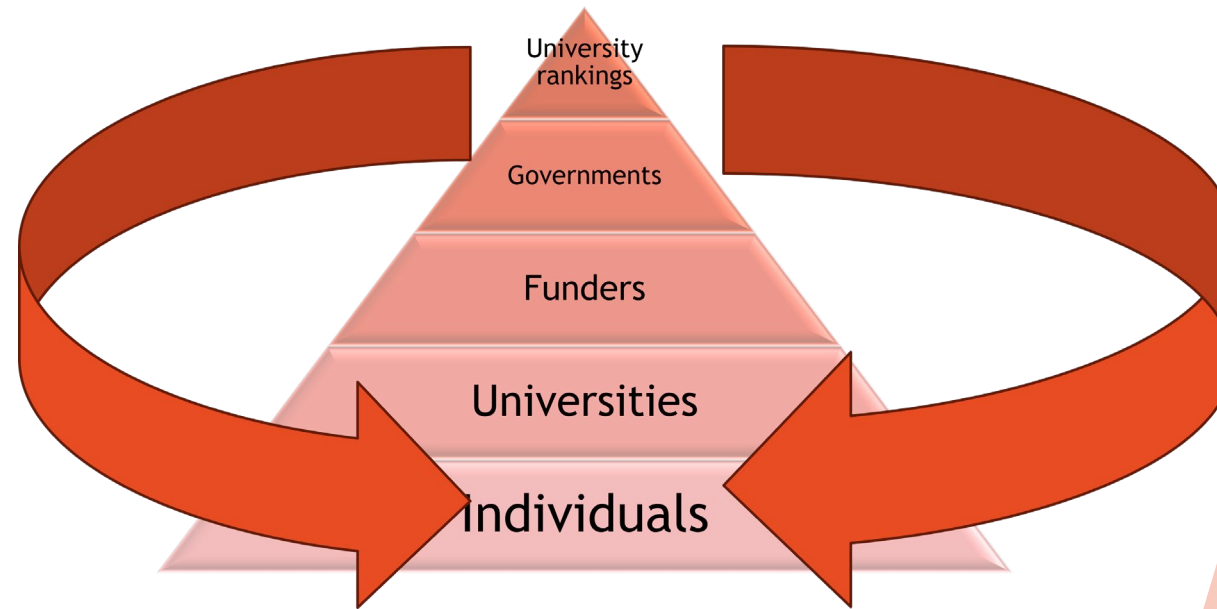
## Core commitments

1. Recognise the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research in accordance with the needs and nature of the research
2. Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation for which peer review is central, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators
3. Abandon inappropriate uses in research assessment of journal- and publication-based metrics, in particular inappropriate uses of Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and h-index
4. Avoid the use of rankings of research organisations in research assessment



# Systemic effects:

- Maintain the status quo
- Concentrating power & prestige
- Homogeneity
- Stifling innovation
- Competition over collaboration
- Deficit model
- Scarcity mindset



# But shouldn't universities be accountable?

- ▶ Yes!
- ▶ But accountable to whom?
- ▶ Who appointed the rankings?
- ▶ To whom are they accountable?

# But shouldn't universities be accountable?

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- ▶ To whom are they accountable?



**Stephen Curry**

@Stephen\_Curry



If you need a league table to tell you what matters, are you really a university?

18:54 · 21/03/2023 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)



ARE THEY TRUE?  
Methodological issues

The background features a series of overlapping, semi-transparent geometric shapes in shades of orange and yellow, primarily concentrated on the right side of the frame. The shapes include triangles and polygons, creating a layered, abstract effect. The overall color palette is warm and vibrant.

# The research question

- ▶ Which is the best university in the world?
- ▶ Best at what?
- ▶ What are the characteristics of a top university
- ▶ ...and in what proportion?

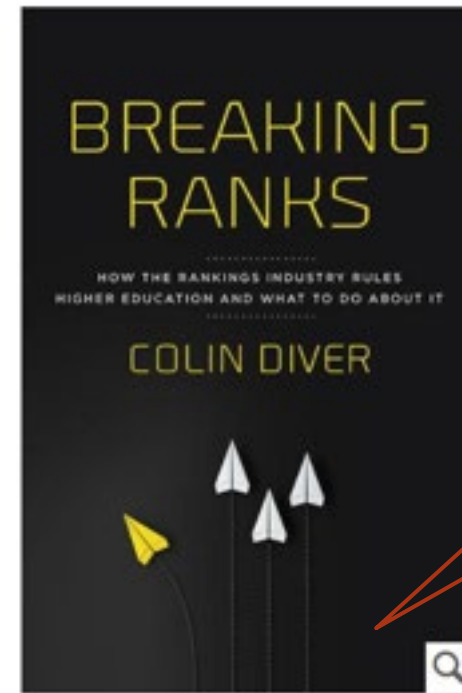
# Indicator validity

## 3. Indicators and Weights for ARWU

Criteria	Indicator	Code	Weight
Quality of Education	Alumni of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals	Alumni	10%
Quality of Faculty	Staff of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals	Award	20%
Quality of Faculty	Highly Cited Researchers	HiCi	20%
Research Output	Papers published in Nature and Science*	N&S	20%
Research Output	Papers indexed in Science Citation Index-Expanded and Social Science Citation Index	PUB	20%
Per Capita Performance	Per capita academic performance of an institution	PCP	10%
Total			100%

# Data quality

The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of The Guardian website with options for 'Print subscriptions', 'Sign in', 'Search jobs', 'Search', and 'UK edition'. Below the navigation is a 'Support the Guardian' banner with the tagline 'Fearless, independent, reader-funded' and a 'Support us' button. The main menu includes 'News', 'Opinion', 'Sport', 'Culture', 'Lifestyle', and 'More'. A secondary menu lists various global regions. The article section is titled 'US universities' and features a yellow warning box stating 'This article is more than 6 months old'. The main headline is 'US News college ranking under scrutiny after Ivy League university plummets'. A sub-headline reads 'Reliability of data used in ranking questioned by Columbia University'. The author is identified as 'Gloria Oladipo in New York' with a Twitter handle '@gaoladipo' and a timestamp of 'Tue 13 Sep 2022 18.01 BST'. Social media sharing icons for Facebook, Twitter, and Email are visible at the bottom left.



Ranking surveys are “unscientific straw polls”

Table 1: Michael Thaddeus’s attempt to replicate the data used in the ranking of his own institution, Columbia University.

League table metric	Columbia	Prof Thaddeus’s estimate
Undergraduate classes with under 20 students	82.5%	62.7% to 66.9%
Full-time faculty with PhD or terminal degree	100%	96%
Percent faculty that is full-time	96.5%	74.1%
Student-faculty ratio	6 to 1	11 to 1
Financial resources per student	\$3.1 billion	\$289 million
Six-year graduation percentage	96%	92%

# Sensitivity

blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2021/03/22/the-absurdity-of-university-rankings/

About

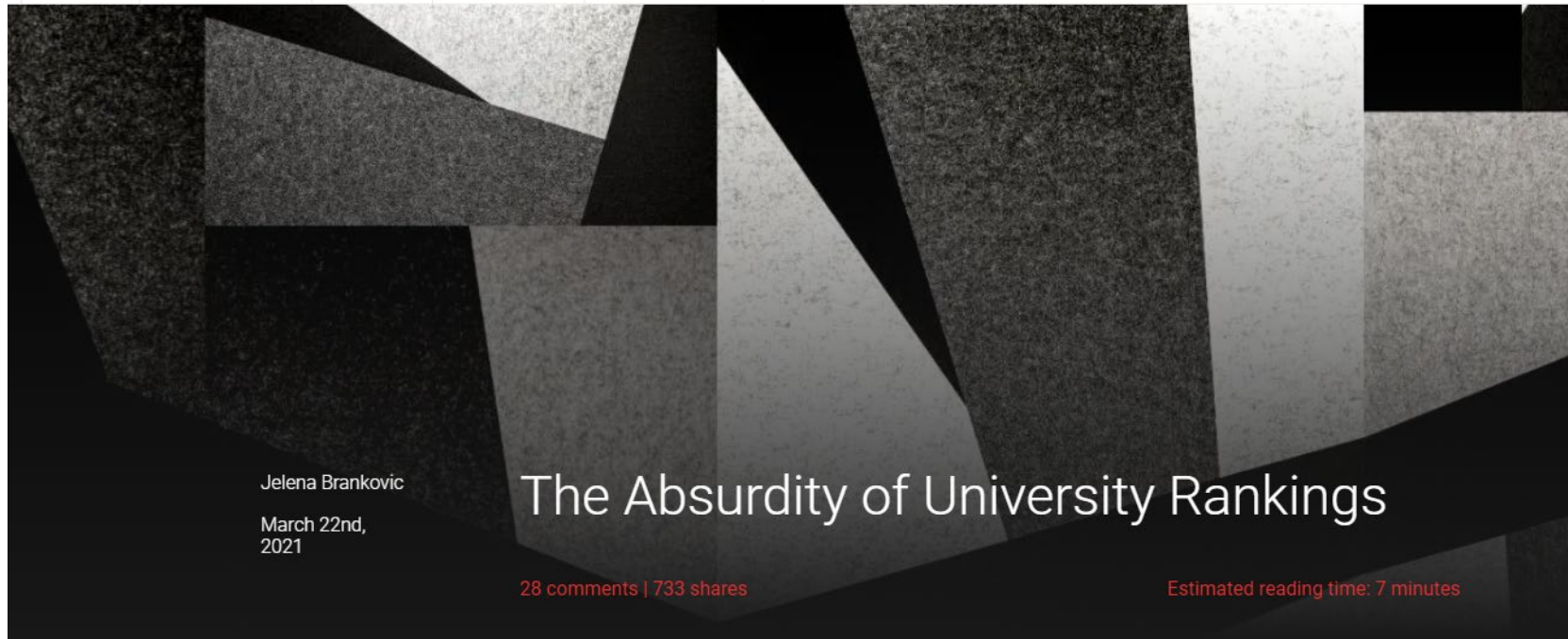
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Jelena Brankovic

March 22nd,  
2021

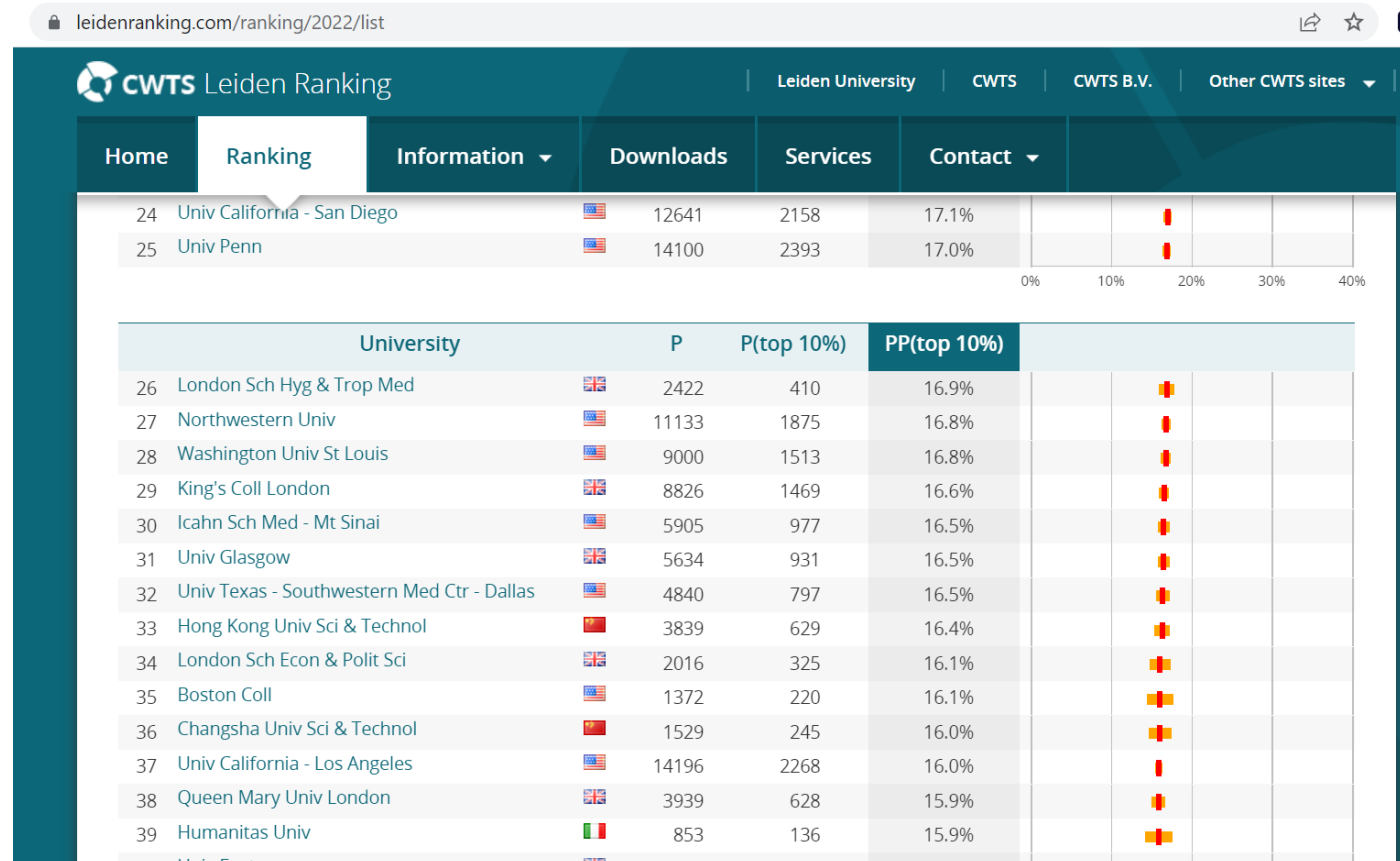
## The Absurdity of University Rankings

28 comments | 733 shares

Estimated reading time: 7 minutes

“Bielefeld’s 120-place rise in the ranking was, our analysis showed, clearly caused by one scholar.”

# Honest reporting: CWTS Leiden Ranking stability intervals





Are they fair?  
Embedding inequalities



# Characteristics of a highly-ranked HEI

- ▶ Old
- ▶ Large
- ▶ Wealthy
- ▶ Research-intensive
- ▶ Science-focussed
- ▶ English-speaking
- ▶ 'Global North'



BRILL

Publications

## Chapter 5 Why Are Our Rankings So White?

In: *Socially Responsible Higher Education*

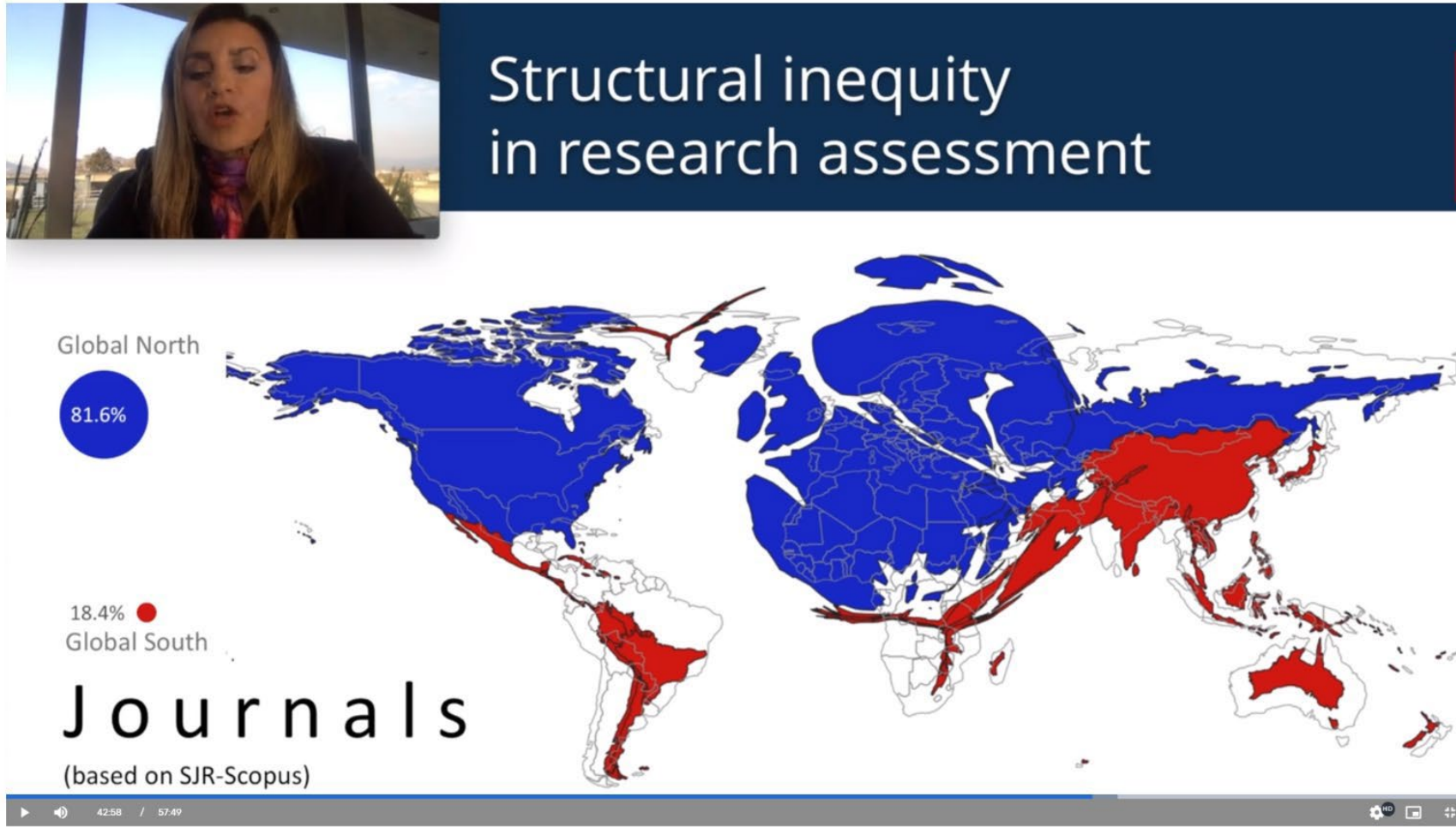
Author: *University Wankings*

Type: Chapter

Pages: 67–79

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004459076\\_006](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004459076_006)

# Location of journals used in THE & QS Rankings



Arianna Becerril-García, Responsible Research  
Assessment Conference, GRC, November 2020

# Location of top 20 HEIs in *THE* World Ranking 2023

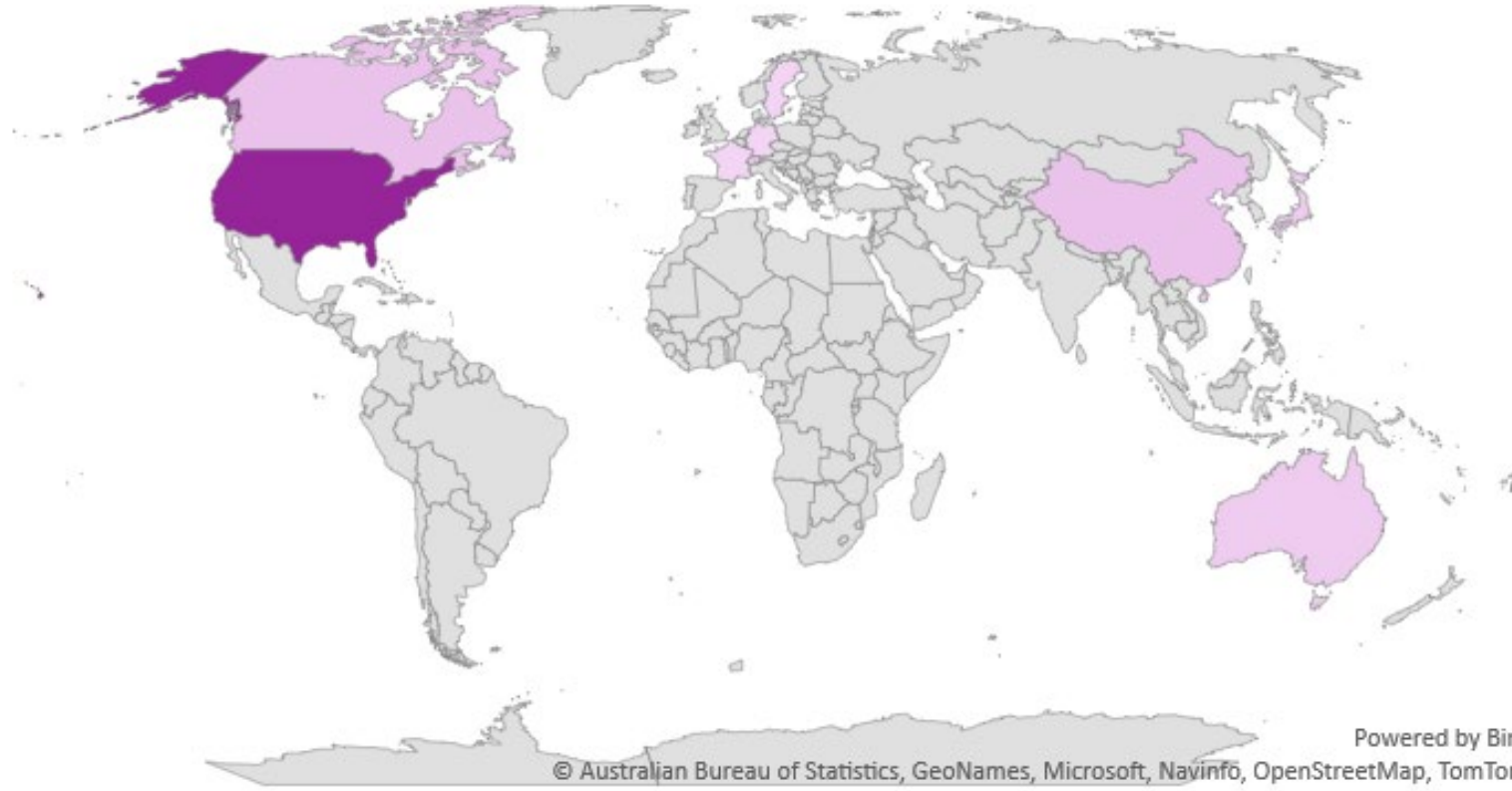




# Location of top 20 HEIs in *THE* Impact Ranking 2023



## Countries in which high potential individuals can be found according the UK government



<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/high-potential-individual-visa-global-universities-list/high-potential-individual-visa-global-universities-list-2022>



**United Nations University**  
International Institute for Global Health

# **World-class Universities? Interrogating the Biases and Coloniality of Global University Rankings**

UNU-IIGH Briefing Paper, February 2023



**United Nations University**  
International Institute for Global Health

## **Statement on Global University Rankings**

Independent Expert Group (IEG) convened by the United Nations  
University International Institute for Global Health



## Yale, Harvard and UC Berkeley law schools withdraw from US News rankings

Both law schools say US News & World Report's annual rankings are in conflict with commitments to diversity and affordability



Students at Harvard law school in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Yale and Harvard appear to be the first to opt out of the US News rankings. Photograph: Steven Senne/AP

In the most dramatic rebuke of the US News & World Report's colleges and universities rankings to date, Yale and Harvard announced on Wednesday they will stop participating in the magazine's law school rankings, citing frustrations with the list's methodology.

## Harvard Leads an Exodus of Medical Schools Withdrawing from US News Rankings

The nation's top-ranked medical schools have stated they will no longer participate in annual rankings with U.S. News, citing methodological and philosophical frustrations.

By Alexandra Tremayne-Pengelly · 01/24/23 4:37pm



Harvard Medical School was the first to withdraw from med school rankings. (Photo by David L. Ryan/The Boston Globe via Getty Images)





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29 September 2023

## Why UU is missing in the THE ranking

country.

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Universities quit  
rankings



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# Conflicts of interest

**Berkeley** Center for Studies in  
Higher Education

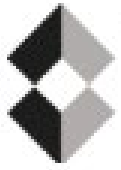
Research & Occasional Paper Series: CSHE.5.2021

**DOES CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISTORT GLOBAL UNIVERSITY RANKINGS?**

April 2021\*

Igor Chirikov  
University of California Berkeley

“Universities with frequent QS-related contracts had an increase of 0.75 standard deviations (~140 positions) in QS World University Rankings ... over five years, regardless of changes in the institutional quality.”



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**Of members improved their academic reputation scores in the 2021 QS Rankings**

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### ADDRESS

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26 Red Lion Square  
London  
WC1R 4HQ  
United Kingdom



**Jelena Brankovic @jelena3121...** ...  
@jelena3121

Imagine a game of football in which a referee is also the coach of one of the teams playing. Crazy, right? You know what's crazier? The audience believing that a fair game is possible.



# What can institutions do?

- ▶ **Accepting** the rankings is an unacceptable position for any intellectually credible institution that claims to care about knowledge equity.
- ▶ **Rejecting** the rankings can amount to financial and reputational suicide

# What **can't** institutions do?

- ▶ **Nothing**
- ▶ If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem.
- ▶ A time is coming when university reputation will be assessed not only by how it's **judged by** the rankings, but by how it **engages with** the rankings



# Union of Students in Ireland call on universities to cut ties with rankings

universitytimes.ie/2023/11/usi-and-tcdsu-call-to-cut-ties-with-university-rankings/

Slack SciVal Support Cent... Time Zone Meeting... Metric Tide EUA Agreement on... EUA Agreement FU... LinkedIn Research... LinkedIn Rankings s... WC

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**NEWS** NOV 2, 2023

## USI and TCDSU Call to Cut Ties with University Rankings


In a motion passed at USI Council this evening and in a letter from the TCDSU to the Provost, student representatives are calling for College governing bodies to “re-evaluate their participation in university rankings” with the ultimate goal to withdraw from those they see as unfit.

Alex Payne  
ASSISTANT EDITOR

[f](#) [t](#) [e](#)

**I**n a motion passed at USI Council this evening and in a letter from the TCDSU to the Provost, student representatives are calling for College governing bodies to “re-evaluate their participation in university rankings” with the ultimate goal to withdraw from those they see as unfit.

Both arguing against the “neoliberalisation of our institutions”, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) and the Trinity College Dublin Students’ Union (TCDSU) are using the example of Utrecht University’s recent withdrawal from the Times Higher Education World Rankings for 2024 to highlight their perceived issues with partaking in a ranking system which the USI describes as an “inherently biased” and the TCDSU claims is unfair.



Eavan McLoughlin for The University Times

# Lots of advice!



## Use of *the rankings*

- ▶ **Institutional decisions should not be driven by rankings**
  - ▶ Universities should follow holistic institutional strategies, instead of investing considerable time and energy in improving rankings results.
  - ▶ Do not use rankings in evaluations, for budget allocation purposes and in other policy contexts.

# Communication about *the rankings*

## ▶ **Universities have a duty to educate:**

- ▶ Educate external stakeholders in the uses and misuses of rankings
- ▶ Encourage students to conduct their own research rather than just using rankings.
- ▶ An institution's decision for or against participating in a ranking exercise should be clearly explained and communicated, as should the meaning of any given outcome or score.

# Collaboration with *the rankings*

- ▶ **Universities should consider the nature of their collaborations with the rankings:**
  - ▶ Not submitting data and information for commercial ranking purposes **or**
  - ▶ ...making the submitted data also publicly available on their websites.
  - ▶ Not participating in reputation surveys distributed by rankers.
  - ▶ Not purchasing products and services from the commercial rankers.
  - ▶ Not hosting or participating in events organised by the commercial rankers.

# Alternatives to *the rankings*

- ▶ **Universities should support better ways of assessing university performance.**
  - ▶ U-Multirank (quantitative)
  - ▶ More Than Our Rank (qualitative)



# Sign up to More Than Our Rank



an inorms initiative

## More Than Our Rank

The *More Than Our Rank* initiative has been developed in response to some of the problematic features and effects of the global university rankings. It provides an opportunity for academic institutions to highlight the many and various ways they serve the world that are not reflected in their ranking position. This initiative is meant for every academic institution, whether ranked or unranked, top 10 or yet to place. It is an initiative for institutions who are proud of their ranking position but also recognize the limitations of the indicators used, and for those who feel that the rankings do not reflect their strengths or institutional mission. Every institution in the world is much more than their rank. This initiative is simply an opportunity to publicly say so and explain why.

### Why participate?

By participating in the *More Than Our Rank* initiative, academic institutions are demonstrating a commitment to responsible assessment and to acknowledging a broader and more diverse definition of institutional success.

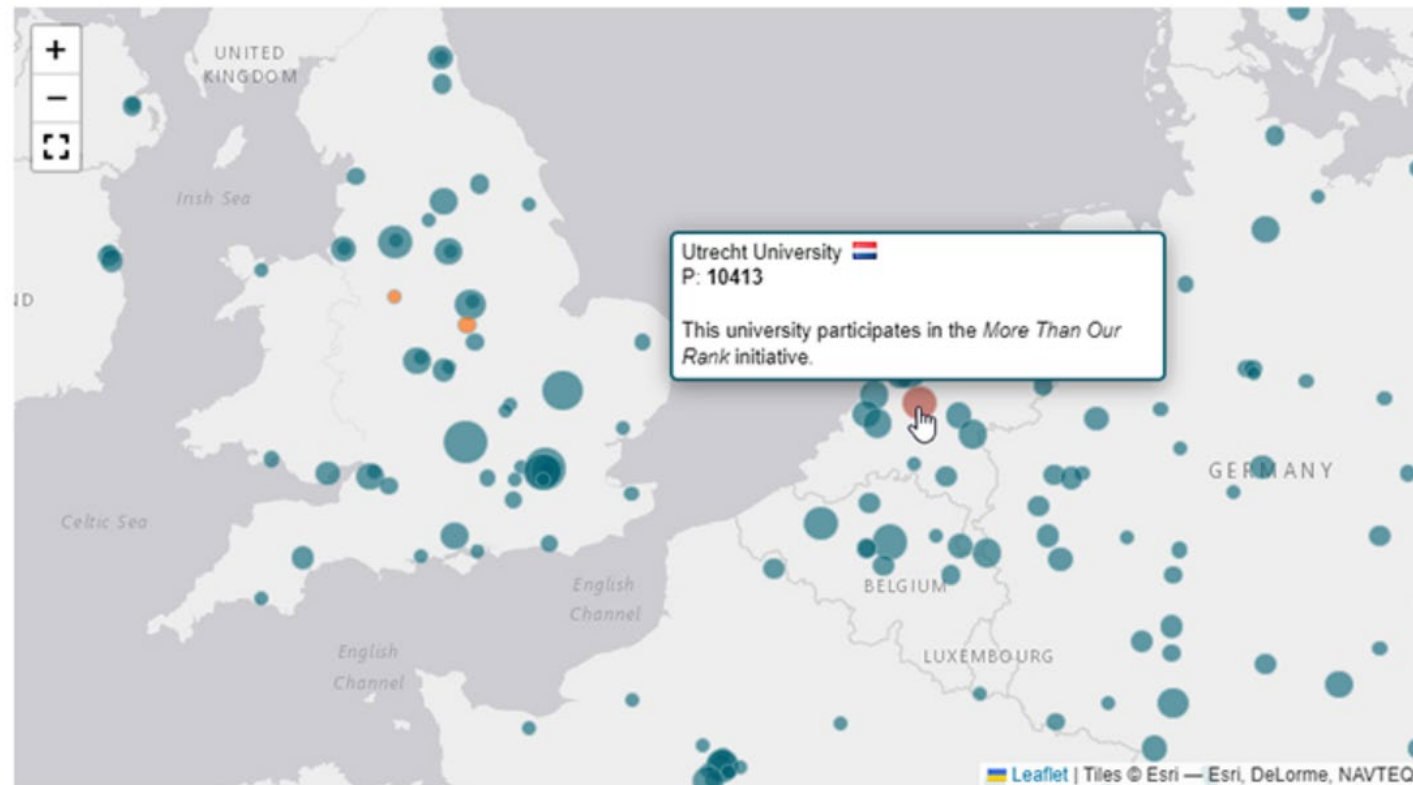
<https://inorms.net/more-than-our-rank/>



	University		P	P(top 10%)	PP(top 10%)			
51	Roy Holloway - Univ London		1047	120	11.5%			
52	Heriot-Watt Univ		1621	184	11.4%			
53	Keele Univ		9					
54	This university participates in the <i>More Than Our Rank</i> initiative.		12					
55	Nottingham Trent Univ		10					
56	Univ W England - Bristol		9					
57	Loughborough Univ		25					
58	Univ Kent		16					
59	Univ Huddersfield		10					
60	Univ Portsmouth		13					
61	Coventry Univ		12					
62	Bournemouth Univ		8					
63	Open Univ		9					
64	Sheffield Hallam Univ		8					

CWTS

The More Than Our Rank logo displayed next to the names highlights that these universities are More Than Our Rank s



More Than Our Rank signatories are highlighted in orange.

## 10. We know that universities are much, much more than their rank

The data that underpins our portfolio of rankings covers a vast array of vital university activities: teaching, research, knowledge transfer, financial health, reputation, inclusion, student outcomes, social and economic impact, and sustainability. They offer a sophisticated set of benchmarks and insights that can be tailored to suit multiple missions in many different contexts. But we also fully understand that data alone can never capture all the extraordinary ways that universities contribute to our world.

Don't tell me you care about  
knowledge equity and do nothing  
about the global university rankings.

# Thanks for listening

- ▶ Dr Elizabeth Gadd
- ▶ *Chair* INORMS Research Evaluation Group
- ▶ *Vice-Chair* Coalition on Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA)
- ▶ Email: [E.a.gadd@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:E.a.gadd@lboro.ac.uk)
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