Recommendation paper

Ranking the university

On the effects of rankings on the academic community and how to overcome them

Universities *of*
The **NETHERLANDS**

Recommendation paper

Ranking the university

& Administrative response from Universities of The Netherlands (UNL)

Ministry of Education, Culture and Science

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Background and composition of the expert group

On 4 February 2022, a workshop on university rankings was held during the Recognition & Rewards Festival. Led by Pieter Duisenberg (President of Universities of the Netherlands, UNL), participants engaged in dialogue on the significance of rankings to universities and the relationship between rankings and Recognition & Rewards (R&R). A key conclusion was that rankings influence universities' policy and that the relevance of rankings is partly derived from their use by the institutions themselves. In addition, it was observed that rankings are not a reliable way to measure quality. However, rankings do play a role, potentially, in attracting students and researchers from the Netherlands and abroad.

In response to this workshop and the concurrent discussion about rankings in the international context (including INORMS and the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment), university rankings were among the topics of conversation in UNL's Education and Research Steering Group (SOO), in April 2022. There, it was recognised that the way the most widely used global university rankings are designed and the value attributed to them are at odds with the principles of R&R. As at the R&R Festival, the UNL steering committee stressed that certain rankings (such as rankings for specific disciplines) can be of value to a university in particular situations. The UNL board then decided to set up an expert group and asked it to further analyse the problems to come up with a more detailed description of possible solutions. This assignment resulted in the present opinion, which is aimed primarily at the academic community, and in particular at university administrators and their policy staff. However, to achieve the desired change in culture that the expert group considers necessary, cooperation between a wide range of stakeholders is essential, as the expert group points out in its recommendations.

The members of the expert group are:
- Frans Kaiser, senior research associate at the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS), University of Twente
- Hans Ouwersloot, senior research policy officer at Maastricht University
- Jessica Winters, head of Marketing at Utrecht University
- Jules van Rooij, senior research policy adviser at the University of Groningen
- Ludo Waltman, professor of Quantitative Science Studies at the Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS) at Leiden University
- Olga Chen-Bisterbosch, institutional research policy adviser at Radboud University
- Tung Tung Chan, senior research intelligence and impact adviser at Erasmus University Rotterdam

The expert group is supported by:
- Roel Esselink, policy adviser at Universities of the Netherlands
- Kim Huijpen, national Recognition & Rewards programme manager

Note that two members of the expert group are involved in producing university rankings. Kaiser and Waltman are involved in U-Multirank. Waltman is additionally involved in the CWTS Leiden Ranking.

Disclaimer: The opinions and advice in this report are solely those of the experts involved and do not necessarily reflect the official position nor the viewpoints of their respective organisations. The information contained herein is for general informational purposes only and is not intended as professional or legal advice.

1. Summary

Universities of the Netherlands (UNL) has asked our expert group for an opinion on issues associated with university rankings in relation to Recognition & Rewards (R&R), a national programme in the Netherlands that aims to more broadly recognise and reward the work of academic staff (for more details on this initiative, see the position paper 'Room for everyone's talent'). We were also asked to propose solutions to these issues. As an expert group, we focus mainly on so-called league tables in the present opinion. These are one-dimensional university rankings that claim to reflect the overall performance of a university.

Our opinion shows that league tables are unjustified in claiming to be able to sum up a university's performance in the broadest sense in a single score. There is no universally accepted criterion for quantifying a university's overall performance, and a generic weighing tool cannot do justice to a university's strategic choice to excel in specific areas. Research, education, and impact achievements cannot be meaningfully combined to produce a one-dimensional overall score. Any attempt to do so will run into arbitrary and debatable decisions about how performance in these three core tasks should be weighted. Is research more important than education? Or is it the other way around? When a weighting system is applied that emphasises one of those core tasks, universities that excel in a different task are disadvantaged. And what indicators should we use to measure a university's performance on each of the three core tasks? The way league tables measure performance on the various core tasks is debatable. Finally, league tables are mostly based on data and a methodology that lack transparency.

The expert group does not expect that implementing R&R will have a significant impact on the position of Dutch universities in the most widely used league tables: The ARWU ('Shanghai') ranking and the THE and QS World University Rankings. Compared with other factors affecting the position of Dutch universities in these league tables, we believe the effect of R&R is very limited.

Conversely, however, there is a serious risk that league tables could undermine the ambitions of R&R. Given the prominent role of research publication and citation statistics in the most widely used league tables, the importance attached to such statistics may 'trickle down' to the level of individual researchers. These may feel pressure to adjust their research focus and publication strategy in a way that benefits their university's position in the league tables. This is at odds with the ambitions of R&R.

To avoid undermining those ambitions, we have formulated recommendations for the responsible use of league tables. We propose a strategy to achieve a change in culture in connection with league tables so as to ensure that universities can deal with league tables responsibly. Opportunistic use should be avoided, while fair and scientifically sound use of such tables should be promoted. At the same time, the change in culture should come about in a way that does not pose disproportionate risks to the reputation and public profile of universities.

A change in culture with respect to league tables is a natural and a necessary next step.

In our proposed strategy, universities can develop initiatives at three levels to achieve the intended change in culture:

- initiatives at the level of individual universities (short term);

- coordinated initiatives at the national level (medium term)

- coordinated initiatives at the international level, particularly the European level (long term)

The matrix in chapter 6 summarises our proposed initiatives.

Achieving the intended culture change is a complex exercise. It will require cooperation between universities which share interests but may also have conflicting interests. However, the change in culture we envisage as an expert group is closely aligned with the broader cultural change initiated nationally and internationally with R&R, the European Reform of Research Assessment and Open Science. A change in culture with respect to league tables is a natural and a necessary next step.

2. Introduction

The playing field of university rankings is vast and increasingly complex. Many different types of rankings are being introduced in rapid succession. Examples include global university rankings, topical rankings, subject rankings, regional rankings, and rankings for universities that have been in existence for less than 50 years.

In this opinion, we mainly restrict ourselves to global university rankings that use a league table concept. These league tables provide a one-dimensional ranking of universities and create the impression that such a ranking reflects the overall performance of a university. The reason for focusing our opinion on league tables is twofold. First, because of the large group of users they serve, league tables have the greatest effect. Second, league tables wrongly suggest that it is possible to summarise university performance in a one-dimensional ranking. By doing so, they completely ignore the many different dimensions in which universities may excel, as indicated, for example, in the recent advisory report 'Interpreting Academic quality' of the Advisory Council for Science and Technology (AWTI). Given the high impact of league tables, this erroneous assumption is problematic.

In addition, league tables are often incompatible with a university's strategic objectives. A well-known risk is that they lead to increasingly similar institutions, which is at odds with the typical ambition to promote individual profiling and greater diversity among institutions. To understand the problematic nature of league tables, chapter 3 offers insight into the strategic context in which universities operate. Chapter 4 sets out how league tables relate to this. The relationship between league tables and Recognition & Rewards (R&R) is discussed in chapter 5. Based on the insights from chapters 3 to 5, chapter 6 offers recommendations for a change in culture with respect to league tables.

3. The context in which universities operate

In modern society, universities have evolved into complex institutions with a broad social mission. Behind this social mission lies a multitude of tasks and objectives. In essence, these are about providing high-quality academic education, conducting high-quality scientific research, and creating social and economic impact through the application of scientific knowledge. As these core tasks fall within different categories, comparing universities is not an easy task, to say the least.

In a general sense, universities aim to excel in each of the three core tasks, but which of these tasks they emphasise varies from university to university. Many universities also have goals derived from those core tasks, such as promoting international scientific cooperation, being a good employer, and making scientific knowledge easily accessible (Open Access, FAIR data, Open Science, Open Education etc.).

Societal trends and needs have a major impact on the prioritisation of research themes at universities and the range of study programmes they offer. After all, universities are institutions with a social mission. They are aware of their role in driving and interpreting social developments. This is why they actively commit to cross-institutional international goals, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Universities are additionally committed to the emancipation of minorities or first-generation students. Finally, a country's political and economic climate and orientation also influence the strategy of universities.

To find their way in this increasingly complex world, universities define a mission and develop a strategy to achieve it. This involves making choices that do justice to the context and complexity of the institution. As a result, some universities will focus more on research, while others commit to a broad teaching remit or instead emphasise social impact. Finally, universities may also differ in the scientific fields they cover, all of which have their own characteristics.

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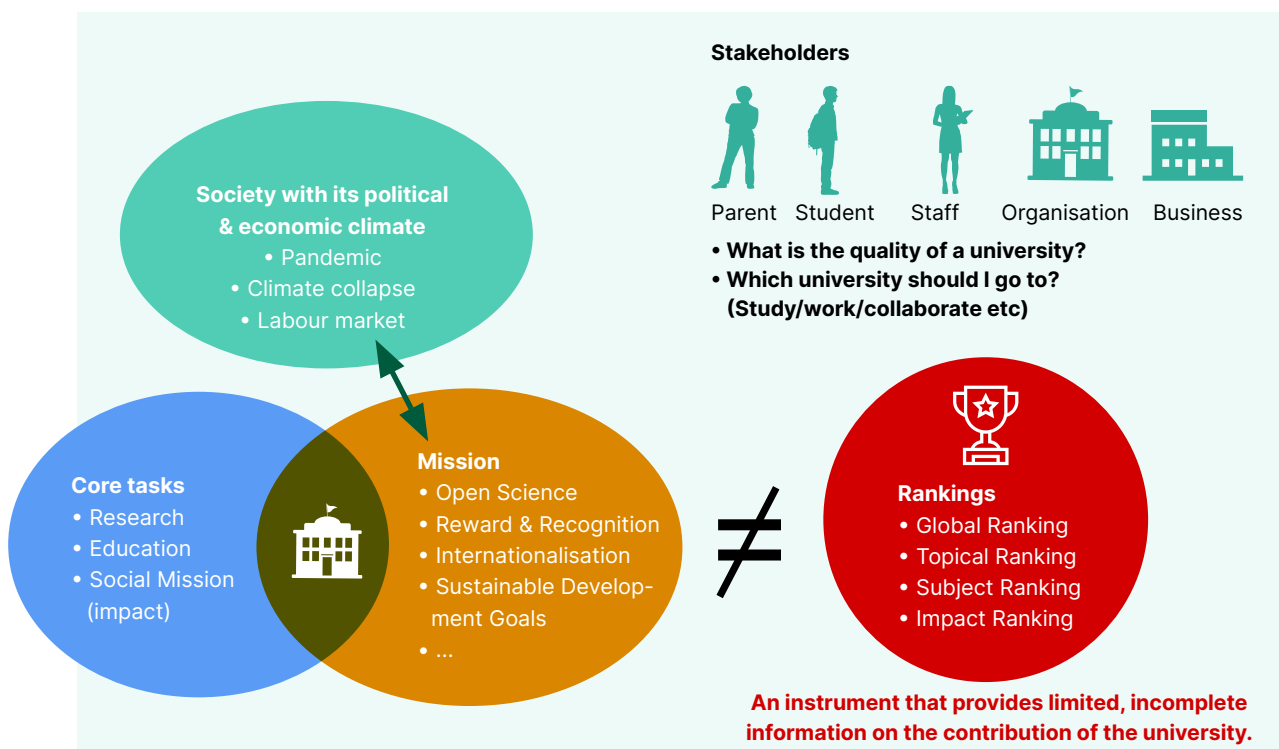
4. Different types of rankings and their users

Like the university context, the world of university rankings is becoming increasingly complex. A multitude of rankings exist, and their number continues to grow steadily. Below, we will briefly discuss the most common types of international university rankings: topical rankings, subject rankings, global university rankings and, in particular league tables. For the sake of brevity, we have decided not to include other rankings, such as national or regional rankings, in our scope.

Global university rankings and league tables
First, there are the so-called global university rankings. With a few exceptions (such as U-Multirank[1]), almost all global university rankings use the league table concept. League tables provide a one-dimensional ranking of universities, claiming to give an overall picture of university performance in all dimensions and across all disciplines. With their approach, league tables fail to do justice to the diversity and complexity of a university's activities. Yet league tables are the most widely known type of ranking and are also widely believed to have the greatest impact.

1   Two members of our expert group (Frans Kaiser and Ludo Waltman) are associated with U-Multirank.

Figure 1: University context in which rankings are used

Stakeholders

Parent   Student   Staff   Organisation   Business

• **What is the quality of a university?**
• **Which university should I go to? (Study/work/collaborate etc)**

Society with its political & economic climate
• Pandemic
• Climate collapse
• Labour market

Core tasks
• Research
• Education
• Social Mission (impact)

Mission
• Open Science
• Reward & Recognition
• Internationalisation
• Sustainable Development Goals
• ...

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Rankings
• Global Ranking
• Topical Ranking
• Subject Ranking
• Impact Ranking

An instrument that provides limited, incomplete information on the contribution of the university.

Figure 2: Types of indicators per league table

Legend:
- Prizes
- Citations
- Publications
- Research reputation
- Research income
- Teaching reputation
- Staff-to-student ratio
- Degrees
- Educational income
- International staff
- International students
- International co-publications
- Employer reputation
- Industry income
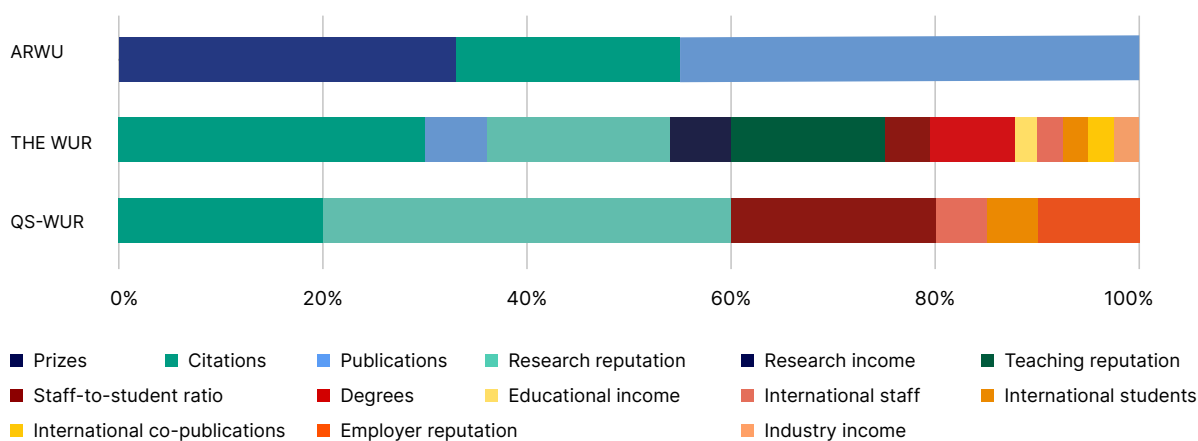
Subject rankings

Subject rankings or field rankings aim to show the performance of universities within a specific scientific discipline. Like league tables, subject rankings have important methodological flaws. However, because subject rankings are limited to a single discipline, the consequences of those flaws are likely to be less far-reaching than those of league tables.

Topical rankings

Topical rankings are rankings that focus on a specific and relatively limited topic, such as job opportunities for alumni, the citation impact of scientific publications or a university's sustainability performance. These kinds of rankings can fit well with the choices a university makes based on its mission or strategy. When a strategic choice coincides with the thematic focus of a topical ranking, this ranking can be a useful tool to inform the university's strategy, monitor progress and possibly even generate benchmarking information. This is not to say that topical rankings are free from methodological issues. However, unlike league tables, topical rankings at least do not claim to give an overall picture of a university's performance.

While many of our recommendations apply to other types of rankings as well, the primary focus in our expert opinion is on league tables, and in particular on the three most well-known league tables:
- Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU, also known as the Shanghai Ranking)
- Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE-WUR)
- Quacquarelli Symonds World University Ranking (QS Ranking)

4.1 Methodology of well-known league tables

There are major differences as well as similarities between the three league tables under review. What they have in common is a methodology that lacks transparency. The league tables do report their methodology in an outline, but the details are often unclear. On top of that, the THE and QS league tables also change their methodology from time to time. While the THE and QS league tables rely heavily on reputation surveys, with weights of 33% and 50% respectively, ARWU is mainly (67%) determined by bibliometric data. The THE and QS league tables tend to be obscure for universities because they are based on reputation scores given by respondents who are subjective and whose expertise is not verified.

Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the different types of indicators used by the three league tables (dated December 2022). Below, we discuss these indicators in more detail.

Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)

ARWU is published by Jiao Tong University Shanghai. A university's position in this league table is determined by six indicators. In effect, these indicators all concern research, but they are considered to represent three different dimensions. In addition, ARWU uses a fourth dimension that aims to correct for the size of a university.

Quality of education:
- Alumni (Ba, Ma or PhD) as Nobel Prize laureates or Field Medallists (10%)

Quality of faculty:
- Scientific staff as Nobel Prize laureates or Field Medallists and employed by the university (20%)
- Highly cited researchers (20%)

Research output:
- Papers published in Nature and Science (20%)
- Papers indexed in Science Citation Index Expanded and Social Sciences Citation Index (20%)

Per capita performance:
- The weighted score of the first five indicators divided by the number of FTE for academic staff (10%)

Unlike the THE and QS league tables, ARWU does not require active participation from a university, but instead obtains all the data it needs from public sources. In other words, universities cannot choose whether to participate or not.

Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE WUR)

THE WUR is published by Times Higher Education and is based on no fewer than thirteen indicators in four dimensions:

Quality of education:
- Teaching reputation survey (15%)
- Staff to student ratio (4.5%)
- PhD student to undergraduate student ratio (2.25%)
- Promotions/staff ratio (6%)
- Institutional income (2.25%)

Research quality:
- Research reputation survey (18%)
- Research income (6%)
- Scientific publications in the Scopus database (6%)
- Citations (30%)

International orientation:
- Share of international students (2.5%)
- Share of international staff (2.5%)
- Share of international co-publications (2.5%)

Impact:
- Income from companies (2.5%)

Universities themselves are required to provide a significant part of the data for THE WUR. This means that participation in THE WUR is a conscious choice of a university and requires a significant time investment.

Quacquarelli Symonds World University Ranking (QS WUR)

QS WUR is compiled by the research firm Quacquarelli Symonds. Universities are assessed based on six indicators in three dimensions:

Reputation:
- Academic reputation, measured by a survey among academics (40%)
- Employer reputation, measured by survey among employers (10%)

Research quality:
- Citations shared by staff (20%)

Quality of education:
- Staff to student ratio (20%)
- Share of international staff (5%)
- Share of international students (5%)

Respondents in the survey among academics are not checked for level of expertise. Anyone with a university email address can be invited. Universities can provide their own data for QS WUR. If a university does not do this, QS itself will collect data for the university.

The methodological differences between ARWU, THE WUR and QS WUR highlight the random nature of their approaches. Performance ratings in

the areas of research, education and impact cannot be meaningfully combined in a single score. Attempts to do so in any way come up against arbitrary and debatable choices on how to weight performance on the three core tasks of universities. Is research more important than education? Or is it the other way around? Any weighting scheme will favour some universities and disadvantage others in an arbitrary way.

4.2 End users of league tables

League tables serve a large and diverse group of end users.[2] The following list, while not exhaustive, does reflect the variety of end users quite well:
- International bachelor's and master's students
- Parents and guardians
- Student counsellors and study advisers at secondary schools and universities
- Politicians and policymakers in higher education
- PhD students and postdocs
- Scientists and research groups
- Universities (internationalisation policy officers and advisers; HR, recruitment, and marketing staff, etc.)
- Agents and recruitment and information-related organisations
- Scholarship organisations
- Companies and other organisations that seek collaboration with higher education instituti-

ons or provide research funding
- International and European government and non-profit organisations
- Organisations such as the Netherlands Foreign Investment Agency (NFIA)

To better understand the impact of league tables, we discuss the way those league tables are used in each of the key end-user groups below.

International bachelor's and master's students
Experience shows that the choice of university, especially among bachelor's students, is mostly based on location, the range of English-language programmes, admission requirements, and financial considerations. A university's ranking is part of the search and can be a decisive factor in the final choice for a programme, exchange, or internship position. International master's students from outside Europe, especially those from Asia and the Middle East and, to a lesser extent, from North America, are more likely to include league tables in their choice for a university.[3] Parents also play a big role in this regard. They usually pay for the study, so they want value for money and the best starting position for their child in the labour market. For European students a high ranking seems to be less of a priority, but they do see it as a plus for a university. For these students, a low ranking may be a reason not to select a university. For master's students, university rankings play a bigger role than for bachelor's students.[4] Master's students also examine the rankings in more detail, for example by also looking closely at subject

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2 Our analysis of the end users of league tables is based partly on our own experience and partly on the relevant international literature. Due to the limited time available to provide our recommendations, it was not possible to conduct an in-depth literature review.

3 E. Hazelkorn, The effects of rankings on student choices and university selection, 2012, 7.

4 E. Hazelkorn, The effects of rankings on student choices and university selection, 2012, 3.

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Any weighting scheme will favour some universities and *disadvantage others in an arbitrary way.*

rankings. Another factor that plays a role for this group is that a high-ranking university is seen as a stepping stone to the best graduate schools and to a good income.[5]

What is remarkable about students' use of league tables is that the league tables concerned focus mainly on research and much less on education. In fact, ARWU completely ignores the education dimension. QS WUR does measure teaching quality but based only on the staff-student ratio. THE WUR additionally uses a reputation score for education (which, however, is highly correlated with the reputation score for research) and diploma statistics.

PhD students and postdocs
PhD students are also partly guided by university rankings when choosing a university, although to a lesser extent, probably, than bachelor's and master's students. Gradually, the 'options market' for PhD students is becoming increasingly commercialised, not only because companies see opportunities there, but also because aspiring PhD students who want to pursue a PhD outside their home country need an initial selection of options. It can be assumed that the more common league tables are less relevant to them because they are too broad. Aspiring PhD students are more likely to look at subject rankings or rely on the reputation of researchers in their discipline. THE and QS also appear to be developing new rankings specifically for PhD students. In addition, the European Economic Committee recently issued the Global PhD Rankings EURO 2023. For PhD

students, rankings will not be a decisive factor for the time being, but they will nevertheless be relevant, especially in the first selection.

University marketing
University rankings are also used for promotional purposes as part of universities' international information and recruitment efforts. Universities publish rankings on their websites and mention them in brochures and presentations for international students. A high score in a subject ranking is often mentioned in information about the study programmes concerned. If a university does not provide information on rankings, students tend to look up this kind of information themselves or actively request it from the university. Universities are constantly working on their image and rankings are useful instruments to help them in this regard.[6]

Companies in the higher education sector
International student recruitment is big business worldwide, even if ideas about the appropriateness of international student recruitment are changing in the Netherlands. International recruitment offers huge opportunities for agents, online study choice platforms, pathway colleges and the like. Study choice platforms are keen to include the top 200 universities, not only to enhance their reputation against competitors, but also to attract other universities and encourage students to use their services. These platforms post rankings on study programme pages and university profile pages.

5 E. Hazelkorn, The effects of rankings on student choices and university selection, 2012, 7-8.

6 Hanover Research, Trends in higher education, recruitment, and technology, 2014, 7.

Politicians and policymakers in higher education
Remarkably, politicians and policymakers in the field of higher education are also important users of university rankings. For instance, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science recently suggested to include rankings in the indicators that are used for monitoring the administrative agreement. Some sector plans in the humanities and social sciences also refer to rankings to highlight the high quality of Dutch research. Furthermore, the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) only grants a residence permit for researchers at a Dutch institution if they are from a top-200 university.[7]

Scholarship organisations
Organisations (both commercial and non-profit organisations) that provide scholarships often have as a requirement that the university a student chooses has a ranking. Therefore, to increase their chances of obtaining a scholarship, students will tend to choose a university with a high ranking position.

Partner universities for education and international cooperation
To present an overall picture, the evaluation of potential partners includes a focus on their position in university rankings. However, this is not a decisive factor.

Companies/organisations
When companies and other organisations want to collaborate with universities or provide funds for research, they prefer to do so with highly reputed universities, as this can reflect positively on their own image and credibility. Especially in the case of organisations that operate on a global scale, the well-known league tables can play a role in the search for suitable universities to partner with.

Above, we have outlined the current situation surrounding the use of university rankings and league tables. As an expert group, we believe that the use of university rankings and league tables as described above is often undesirable. We will discuss this in more detail in the next chapter.

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7 See the IND's website: 'A designated foreign educational institution is an educational institution in the top 200 of at least 2 general rankings or available rankings per faculty or academic subject. Your educational institution must have been in the top 200 of these rankings on the date that you completed the study programme or doctoral programme. The rankings that include your educational institution must come from at least 2 different publishers. Rankings published by the same publisher count as one.'

5. League tables in relation to universities' strategic objectives

In the previous chapter, we discussed the various types of university rankings, the special role played by league tables and the parties that use these league tables. In this chapter, we show how universities' use of league tables is at odds with the strategic objectives those universities define for themselves.

As argued above, there is no single or best method to measure university performance in all dimensions and aggregate the results into a simple one-dimensional league table. Performance ratings in the areas of research, education and impact cannot be meaningfully combined in a single score. Attempts to do so will always come up against arbitrary and debatable choices on how to weight performance on the three core tasks of universities. Is research more important than education? Or is it the other way around? When a weighting scheme is used that emphasises one of the core tasks, institutions that excel in that one core task are favoured while those that prioritise another core task are disadvantaged. When comparing university performance, it is essential to take into account the strategic choices that institutions make and the social context in which they do so. League tables completely ignore this dimension.

In this chapter, we illustrate this by zooming in on the league table of the Times Higher Education World University Rankings and its relationship with the ambitions of the Recognition & Rewards (R&R) programme.

5.1 Times Higher Education World University Rankings

As Figure 3 shows, Times Higher Education (THE) claims that their World University Rankings (WUR) provides a ranking of 'the best universities in the world'.

Figure 3: The THE WUR website claims to showcase the best universities in the world (16 November 2022).
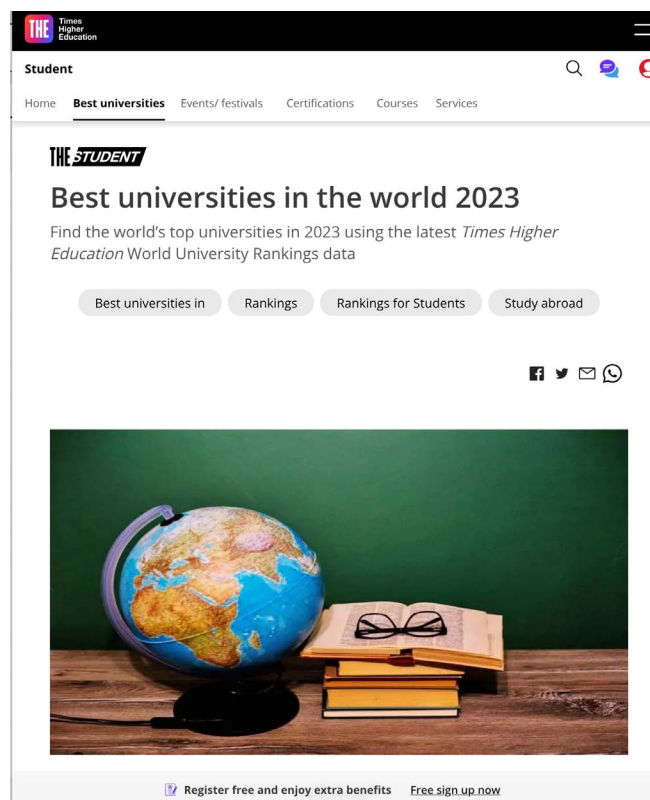
However, analysis of THE's claim reveals that they do not explain what they mean by 'the best'. They fail to provide an explicit answer as to what they define as a good university, and thus to explain their perspective on the 'quality' of universities. The data THE uses to compile their rankings provide clues, however, as to their implicit definition of quality. THE uses indicators combined in pillars that are supposed to reflect universities' performance in education, research, impact, and internationalisation (see chapter 4.1). However, those indicators are very limited in their ability to measure performance in these areas. Moreover, THE assigns arbitrary weights to the four pillars of their rankings: 30% for education, 60% for research (including citations), 7.5% for internationalisation and 2.5% for income from companies.

As a result, universities that choose to emphasise education, or to focus more on impact, are disadvantaged by THE WUR, even though such choices are just as legitimate as a choice for a strong focus on research. The honest story would be that THE WUR is a ranking in which research is considered twice as important as education, and in which internationalisation and impact play an even more subordinate role. Other league tables, including QS WUR and ARWU, run into similar problems. The three league tables all assign great weight to research, and they tend to measure research performance largely in bibliometrics. This is at odds with the ambitions formulated in R&R.

5.2 League tables in relation to Recognition & Rewards

Recognition & Rewards (R&R) is a national programme in the Netherlands that promotes a balanced assessment of academics. The key principle is that academics can be assessed on four dimensions: research, education, impact, and leadership, plus a fifth dimension for academics in the medical sector, namely patient care. R&R chooses not to specify how the different dimensions should be weighted. After all, different academics have different talents and can therefore fulfil different roles within a team: some are excellent lecturers, others are excellent researchers, etc. Individuals are part of a team, and within that team each person has a role that suits their strengths. Each individual must be assessed against appropriate criteria.
To do justice to everyone's qualities, a customised approach is essential. However, league tables presuppose the validity of universal criteria and fail to recognise the need for customisation.

R&R also aims to promote a shift from quantity to quality, especially in the field of research. For example, it places less emphasis on bibliometric indicators, such as publication and citation statistics, in favour of qualitative assessment.

All Dutch universities have committed to the R&R principles, whose implementation is currently in process. The question, however, is how R&R compares with the league tables. We will approach this question from two perspectives. First, what are the expected effects of R&R on the position of Dutch universities in the league tables? Second, what are the possible effects of league tables on the implementation and acceptance of R&R?

League tables presuppose the validity of universal criteria and fail to **recognise** *the need for customisation.*

We expect the impact of R&R on the position of Dutch universities in the league tables to be very small. R&R reduces the use of bibliometric indicators, especially publication and citation statistics. This may cause researchers to focus less on maximising publications and citations. Since publication and citation statistics play a role in the league tables, this could lead to a slight fall of Dutch universities in their rankings. However, a modest rise in the rankings is also a possibility. A reduced emphasis on publications could result in a higher average citation score for publications from Dutch universities, which could then rise in some league tables as a result.

In any case, we expect that the effect (negative or positive) of R&R on the position of Dutch universities in the league tables will be very small compared to other effects affecting the position of Dutch universities. Examples include the effect of the growth of universities elsewhere in the world, for example in China, and the effect of adjustments in league table methodology. Moreover, an increasing number of countries are reducing the emphasis on publication and citation statistics. This includes European countries (Coalition on Advancing Research Assessment), but also, to a certain extent, countries such as China. Compared with universities in these countries, there is no reason to expect Dutch universities to underperform in the league tables.

As explained above, league tables are based on assumptions that are not compatible with many of R&R's ambitions. Typically, researchers and the teams they are part of will not allow themselves to be guided by league tables. Nevertheless, there is a real risk that the effects of league tables will

'trickle down' within universities and thus undermine R&R's ambitions. For example, university administrators may experience pressure to make their institution perform better in league tables. This could lead them to adopt assessment criteria, possibly unwittingly, that are not compatible with R&R.

We may conclude that there is a significant tension between league tables and R&R. League tables can be a major obstacle to achieving R&R's ambitions. This raises questions about ways for universities to deal with league tables in a responsible manner. For example, to what extent is it justified for universities to provide data to league table publishers? To what extent is it justified to use league tables as an instrument in the recruitment of international students? And to what extent are universities responsible for promoting critical reflection on league tables? In the next chapter, we present recommendations for universities to deal with these dilemmas.

6. Recommendations

League tables present universities with a dilemma. On the one hand, university administrators experience pressure for their institution to perform well in league tables. In addition, many universities regard league tables as an important means of recruiting international students. On the other hand, league tables use performance indicators that are often at odds with universities' strategic priorities, and those indicators are not compatible with Recognition & Rewards (R&R) ambitions. Moreover, the questionable methodology of league tables is difficult to reconcile with the scientific values advocated by universities.

Universities often struggle with this dilemma. On the one hand, for example, administrators are expressing criticism of league tables, while at the same time universities are embracing league tables in their marketing activities. This pragmatic approach feels uncomfortable to many, including the members of the expert group. At the same time, this approach is understandable given the complex national and international playing field in which universities operate.

However, in view of the steps universities intend to take in advancing R&R, we as an expert group believe that this pragmatic approach is increasingly difficult to defend. A weak compromise between rejecting league tables and playing the 'ranking game' can significantly undermine universities' ambitions in R&R. As an expert group, we recognise the complexity of the playing field in which universities operate. We advise universities to navigate this complexity with a strategic vision aimed at a change in culture regarding league tables and closely aligned with the culture change that is already underway in R&R and Open Science.

The change in culture we propose is aimed at enabling universities to deal with university rankings and league tables in a responsible manner. It should help universities avoid opportunistic use of university rankings and league tables and promote their use in a way that is both fair and scientifically responsible. At the same time, this change in culture should take place in a way that does not pose disproportionate risks to the reputation and public profile of universities.

6.1   Change in culture regarding league tables

Our recommendation to bring about a change in culture regarding league tables focuses primarily on the influential global university rankings, in particular the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings, the QS World University Rankings and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), also known as the Shanghai Ranking. As pointed out in chapter 4, these league

As an expert group, we recognise the *complexity* of the playing field in which universities operate.

tables are characterised by their one-dimensional approach, as they reduce the entirety of a university's performance data to a single position in a ranking. In addition, these league tables, particularly those of THE and QS, are based on a methodology that lacks transparency.

As an expert group, we recognise the value that quantitative indicators may have for universities. On the one hand, our advice focuses on moving away from simplistic one-dimensional and non-transparent indicators that ignore the complexity and diversity of the university landscape. On the other hand, we aim to show how universities can contribute to the creation of transparent multidimensional indicators. Such indicators enable universities to highlight their performance in a responsible way, for instance for the purpose of recruiting international students.

By developing a targeted strategy for a change in culture regarding league tables, Dutch universities are joining similar initiatives elsewhere in the world. For example, more than 500 organisations that have joined the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) have pledged not to use league tables in research evaluations. In the UK, the role of league tables is currently being critically examined in the context of the future development of the national evaluation system, known as the Research Excellence Framework. In China, league tables are also under increasing

scrutiny. Recently, three leading Chinese universities ended their cooperation with international league tables. And in the United States, several leading law schools recently ended their participation in the U.S. News ranking. In addition, the International Network of Research Management Societies (INORMS) recently launched the More Than Our Rank initiative. This initiative is gaining visibility and is also being publicly embraced by a number of universities. More Than Our Rank gives universities an opportunity to highlight the many and various ways they serve society that are not reflected in their ranking position. Although all these developments are still relatively small-scale, they do reflect increasing worldwide recognition of the need for a change in culture regarding league tables.

Achieving a change in culture regarding league tables is a complex challenge. It requires cooperation between universities which share interests but may also have competing interests. Other stakeholders, such as government agencies and media organisations, should also be included in this cooperation. In addition, it requires careful coordination between the various domains in which league tables can play a role, such as communication, student recruitment and research evaluation. Given this complexity, a change in culture requires a well-designed strategy. Ad hoc initiatives are likely to have little impact.

We propose a strategy in which universities develop initiatives at three levels to bring about a change in culture with regard to league tables:

🏛 initiatives at the level of individual universities

🦁 coordinated initiatives at the national level

🌐 coordinated initiatives at the international level, particularly the European level

Initiatives at the level of individual universities are the easiest to implement, but they will make only a modest contribution to the intended change in culture. For example, an individual university probably will not stop using league tables for marketing purposes if competing universities are not willing to do the same. However, the advantage of initiatives at the level of individual universities is that they can be realised in a relatively short period of time (e.g., within two years).

Coordinated initiatives at the international level are the most difficult to implement but can make the biggest contribution to the desired change in culture. Potentially, initiatives at this level could make it possible, for example, to stop the use of league tables altogether, including for marketing purposes. The disadvantage of initiatives at the international level is that they require a longer-term effort (e.g., at least five years).

In the strategy we propose, universities work on a change in culture regarding league tables in four areas:
- the use of league tables;
- communication about league tables;
- collaboration with league tables; and
- alternatives to league tables.

Initiatives should be developed in each of these areas to achieve the intended change in culture. Initiatives in the various areas should be closely coordinated.

The matrix below summarises our proposed culture change strategy with regard to league tables. The rows of the matrix show the three levels at which a change in culture should be promoted. The columns show the four areas.

For the short term, we advise universities to take the steps presented in the top row of the matrix. Individual universities can take these steps relatively easily and with little risk. At the same time, we advise universities to prepare joint, national-level steps for the medium term, as shown in the middle row of the matrix. These steps are more ambitious. Acting jointly at the national level will prevent some universities from incurring more risks than others. Finally, for the longer term, we advise universities to actively seek support for joint activities at the international level, as shown in the bottom row of the matrix. A sufficient level

The change in culture we propose is aimed at enabling universities to deal with university rankings and league tables *in a responsible manner*.

of international support for such initiatives offers an opportunity to achieve a more radical change in culture regarding league tables. Joint international initiatives seem to be the only way to completely eliminate the perverse dynamics generated by league tables. The steps in the bottom row of the matrix carry risks, for example for recruiting international students, and our advice is to take these steps only if there is sufficient support to act jointly at the international level.

As explained earlier in this report, league tables are a significant barrier to universities realising their ambitions in R&R. The proposed strategy to culture change regarding league tables provides a systematic approach to overcome this barrier. As an expert group, we wish to stress that we do not reject the use of quantitative indicators that show a university's performance relative to other universities. We do believe however that the indicators used should be transparent in terms of the underlying data and methodology so that they can always be critically questioned. In addition, a variety of indicators should be available so that universities can focus on those that fit well with their strategic objectives.

Achieving the intended change in culture regarding league tables will require considerable effort from universities and careful coordination between them. We recommend asking one or a few universities to take on a leading and coordinating role and ensuring that there is sufficient capacity for them to fill this role properly. We also consider it essential to make the best possible use of the vast expertise available within Dutch universities when implementing the proposed culture change strategy.

	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

Administrative response from the Universities of The Netherlands (UNL)

The UNL board has received the recommendation entitled 'Ranking the university: On the effects of rankings on the academic community and how to deal with them' and would like to thank the expert group for their comprehensive consideration.

The recommendation highlights a number of problematic elements surrounding the use of certain university rankings. The expert group demonstrates that these problematic elements are particularly prevalent in the so-called league tables. League tables combine a university's performance data on research, education, and impact to arrive at a one-dimensional overall score. The expert group concludes that this cannot be done in a meaningful way, and that the underlying data and methodology used for this purpose tend to lack transparency. In calculating the overall scores, the league tables all assign considerable weight to a university's research achievements. Much of this research performance is measured with irresponsible "bigger is better" indicators. Such indicators assign disproportionate value to 'number' – as in 'number of publications', for instance. This is at odds with the ambitions of the Recognition & Rewards programme, through which universities want to place greater emphasis on the quality of work and less on the quantitative results of academics.

The expert group's recommendations focus on the league tables in particular. There are also, among other rankings, subject rankings and topical rankings. Subject rankings reflect the performance of universities within a specific scientific discipline. Topical rankings focus on a specific and relatively limited topic, such as the sustainability of a given university. These kinds of rankings can fit well with the choices a university makes based on its mission or strategy. Subject rankings and topical rankings may have methodological shortcomings similar to those of league tables, although these shortcomings are usually less far-reaching. Lastly, the recommendations also address multidimensional rankings. The expert group advises universities to support the development of open multidimensional alternatives to league tables.

The expert group has made proposals to bring about a culture change surrounding the use of league tables. This is indeed the direction we, the Dutch universities, wish to move in. 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. Individual universities may determine their own pace in implementing the various recommendations. Universities will continue to use transparent subject rankings, topical rankings and multidimensional rankings that are aligned to the strategy of the university or discipline.

Dutch universities will use the coming period to work toward the intended culture change together. We are delighted that the University of Twente, Leiden University, Maastricht University and the VU University Amsterdam are willing to take the lead in this. At both the individual university level and the national level, we will implement changes in the use of league tables and in communication regarding the tables. There is also a need for transparency and communication within the universities themselves. Several universities will host a dialogue concerning how we deal with rankings.

The expert group's long-term recommendations call for further elaboration and a coordinated approach at the international level. It is therefore important to identify the potential impacts of these recommendations. At the same time, we want to explore how we can effectively present ourselves as universities without using league tables. To this end, Dutch universities will, among other things, contribute to the development of multidimensional alternatives to league tables (such as U-Multirank). Universities will provide data to such initiatives and explore potential uses for these alternatives, such as for marketing purposes. In addition, relevant developments such as the More Than Our Rank initiative have emerged, as well as the more than 500 organisations that have signed the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment, thereby committing themselves to avoid the use of university rankings in research assessments.

The expert group recommends actively seeking support at the international level for joint initiatives in connection with league tables, partly in relation to the impact they have on Recognition & Rewards. Joint action appears to be the only way to completely rid ourselves of the perverse dynamics that league tables generate. This is why we, the Dutch universities, are actively engaging in the international conversation about rankings and the impact of league tables on science and higher education. We are doing so in cooperation with universities from other countries, the League Tables themselves, developers of alternatives to league tables and within the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA). However, we do not yet wish to commit to the outcomes of these conversations. We will only embrace the expert group's recommendations from the bottom row of the matrix, at the international level for the longer term, once there is sufficient support for concerted international action.

UNL therefore sees scope to explore a coordinated approach at the international level in the coming period. The European University Association (EUA), for instance, has said it intends to release a statement on university rankings. In support of this process, UNL will also take the lead in meeting with ranking experts from different countries. This international cooperation could potentially result in international guidelines on the use of university rankings.

Universities *of*
The **Netherlands**