

# From newspaper supplement to data company:

Tracking rhetorical change in  
the Times Higher Education's rankings coverage

Morten Hansen | Astrid Van den Bossche

08 March 2022 CGHE Seminar  
Department of Education, University of Oxford.

# Outline

- Rankings
- Times Higher Education . . . from what to what?
- Corpus & Method
- Findings
- Reflection & conclusion
- Q&A

# University rankings

- Encourage competition (Brankovic et al., 2018)
  - Are viewed with scepticism as an imperfect measurement to harmful fabrication (Ashwin, 2020; Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Brankovic, 2021)
  - There is a sense that they are increasingly accepted by university leaders as the new normal (Hazelkorn, 2008, 2018)
- How do rankers make their product meaningful to the sector?

# Times Higher Education

- It publishes THE World University Rankings
  - The Times (18<sup>th</sup> century-)
  - The Times Higher Education Supplement (1971-2008)
  - Times Higher Education (2008-)



→ It is a newspaper supplement that has turned into a data company

# A data company

“

THE is the world leader in university data, rankings and content, with institutions, academics, students, industry and governments utilising the information to gain insight, inform strategic priorities, benchmark, assess and select higher education institutions. THE has led on higher education analysis for nearly half a century, and has more than 700 clients globally across its data, consultancy and hiring services, including Oxford and Cambridge Universities in the UK and Harvard and MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) in the US. [...] THE's in-house data team analysed over nine million data points ...(Inflexion, 2019).

”

# A data company

“

THE is the world leader in **university data**, **rankings** and **content**, with institutions, academics, students, industry and governments utilising the information to gain insight, inform strategic priorities, benchmark, assess and select higher education institutions. THE has led on higher education analysis for nearly half a century, and has more than 700 clients globally across its data, consultancy and hiring services, including Oxford and Cambridge Universities in the UK and Harvard and MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) in the US. [...] THE's in-house data team analysed over nine million data points ...(Inflexion, 2019).

”

# A data company

“

THE is the world leader in **university data**, **rankings** and **content**, with institutions, academics, students, industry and governments utilising the information to **gain insight**, **inform strategic priorities**, **benchmark**, **assess** and select higher education institutions. THE has led on higher education analysis for nearly half a century, and has more than 700 clients globally across its data, consultancy and hiring services, including Oxford and Cambridge Universities in the UK and Harvard and MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) in the US. [...] THE's in-house data team analysed over nine million data points ...(Inflexion, 2019).

”

# A data company

“

THE is the world leader in **university data**, **rankings** and **content**, with institutions, academics, students, industry and governments utilising the information to **gain insight**, **inform strategic priorities**, **benchmark**, **assess** and select higher education institutions. THE has led on higher education analysis for nearly half a century, and has more than 700 clients globally across its data, consultancy and hiring services, including **Oxford** and **Cambridge Universities** in the UK and **Harvard** and **MIT** (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) in the US. [...] THE's in-house data team analysed over nine million data points ...(Inflexion, 2019).

”



# A data company

“

THE is the world leader in **university data**, **rankings** and **content**, with institutions, academics, students, industry and governments utilising the information to **gain insight**, **inform strategic priorities**, **benchmark**, **assess** and select higher education institutions. THE has led on higher education analysis for nearly half a century, and has more than 700 clients globally across its data, consultancy and hiring services, including **Oxford** and **Cambridge Universities** in the UK and **Harvard** and **MIT** (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) in the US. [...] **THE's in-house data team analysed over nine million data points** ... (Inflexion, 2019).

”

# Journalism & data analytics are different activities

- Rankings journalism create an ambiguous relationship between the newsmaker and its readers.
- How can we explore whether THE engaged with this ambiguity strategically?



How did *THE*'s rhetorical use of rankings change after the launch of the *World University Rankings* in 2004, and the expansion of their rankings portfolio in 2013?

1. What **topics** characterize the articles that mention rankings? Does the focus change over time?
2. **Who** is being drawn into rankings-related journalism, and in what contexts are the various actors placed?
3. What can the **rhetorical composition** of the rankings journalism tell us about the **strategies** that *THE* has used to **legitimize** its rankings?





# The corpus

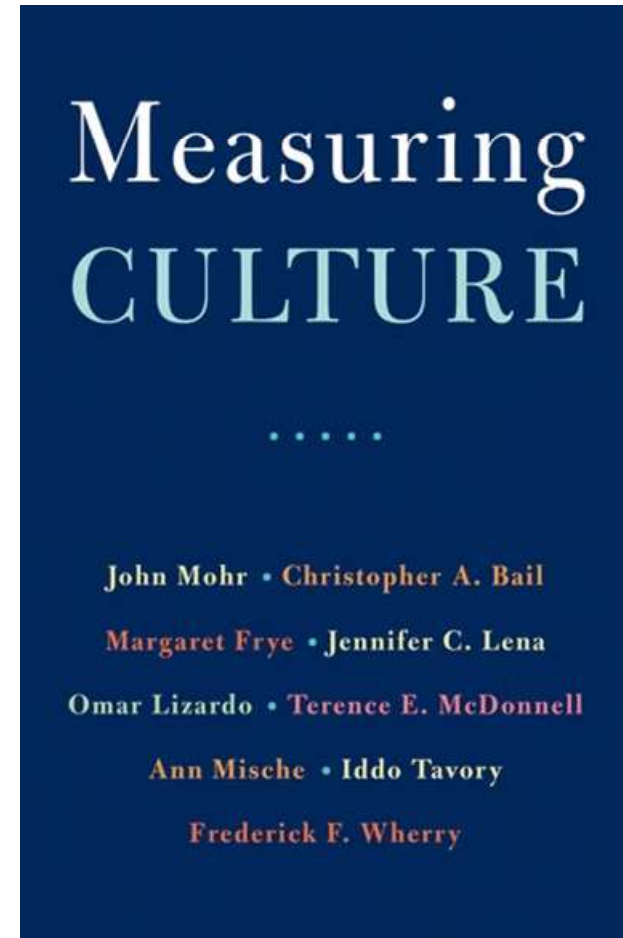
	<i>Corpus</i>	<i>Pre-WUR (1994 - 2003)</i>	<i>WUR years (2004 - 2012)</i>	<i>Expansion (2013 - 2020)</i>
<i>Total number of articles</i>	72,768	34,426	28,917	9,425
<i>Total word-count</i>	68,223,112	26,782,768	25,993,466	15,446,878
<i>Number of ranking supplement articles</i>	555	0	121	434
<b><i>Ranking   league table subset</i></b>				
<i>Number of articles</i>	3,296	629	1,355	1,312
<i>Proportion of total articles</i>	4.53%	1.83%	4.69%	13.92%
<i>Total word-count</i>	5,833,678	785,838	2,116,122	2,931,718
<i>Median word-count</i>	1,326	958	1,164	1,588
<i>Mean word-count</i>	1,770	1,249	1,562	2,235
<i>Standard deviation</i>	1,624	1,027	1,520	1,828

# Method

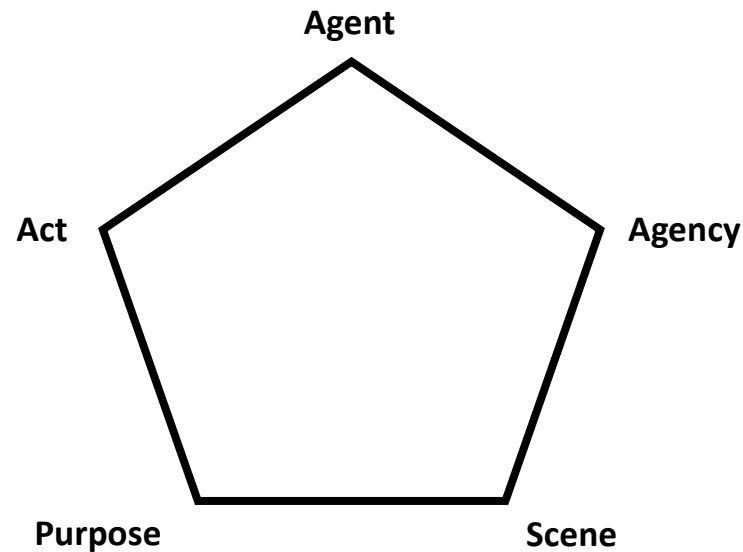


# Computational hermeneutics

- Uses computational text analysis to study cultural artefacts
- Going back-and-forth between...
  - ...approaches (qualitative-quantitative)
  - ...readings (close-distant)
- Interpretive



# Rhetorical strategies



Burke's dramatic pentad

- **Ratios** are the relationships between the pentadic elements.
- E.g., agent-scene-act; scene-agent-agency

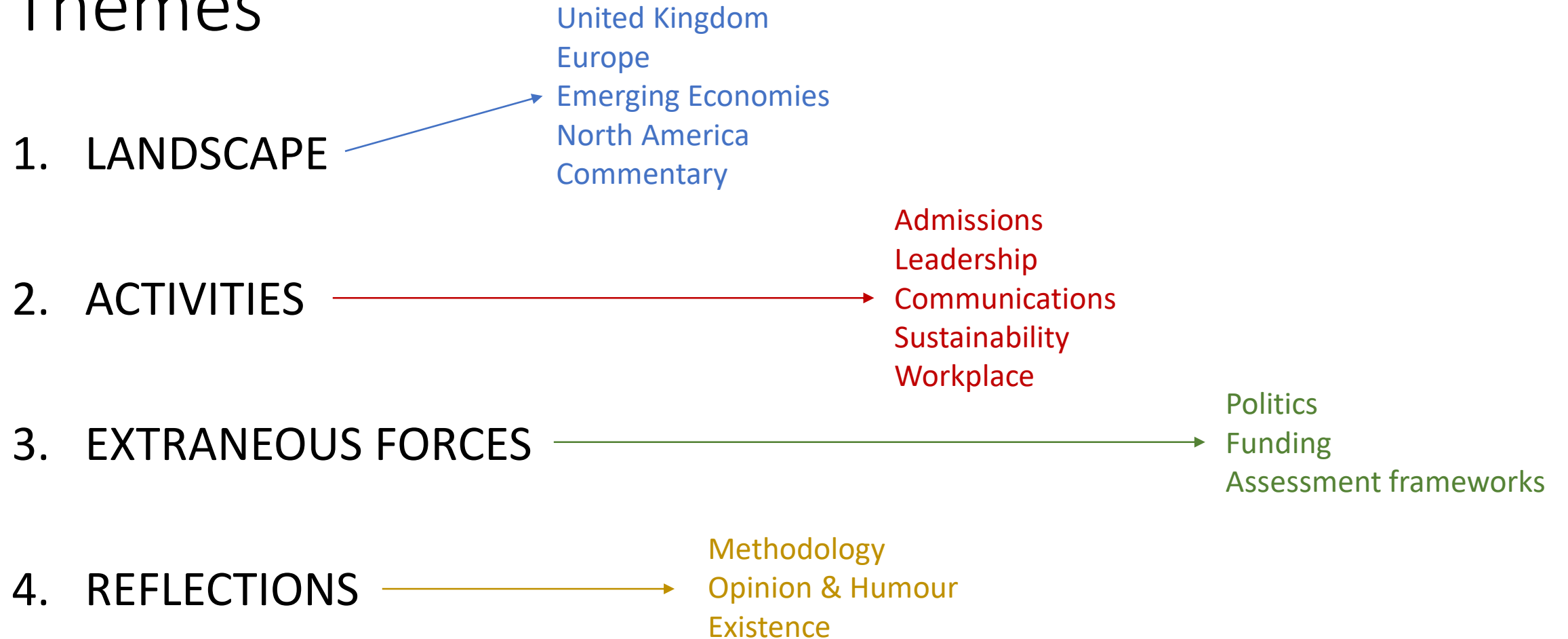


# Scenes

# Scenes

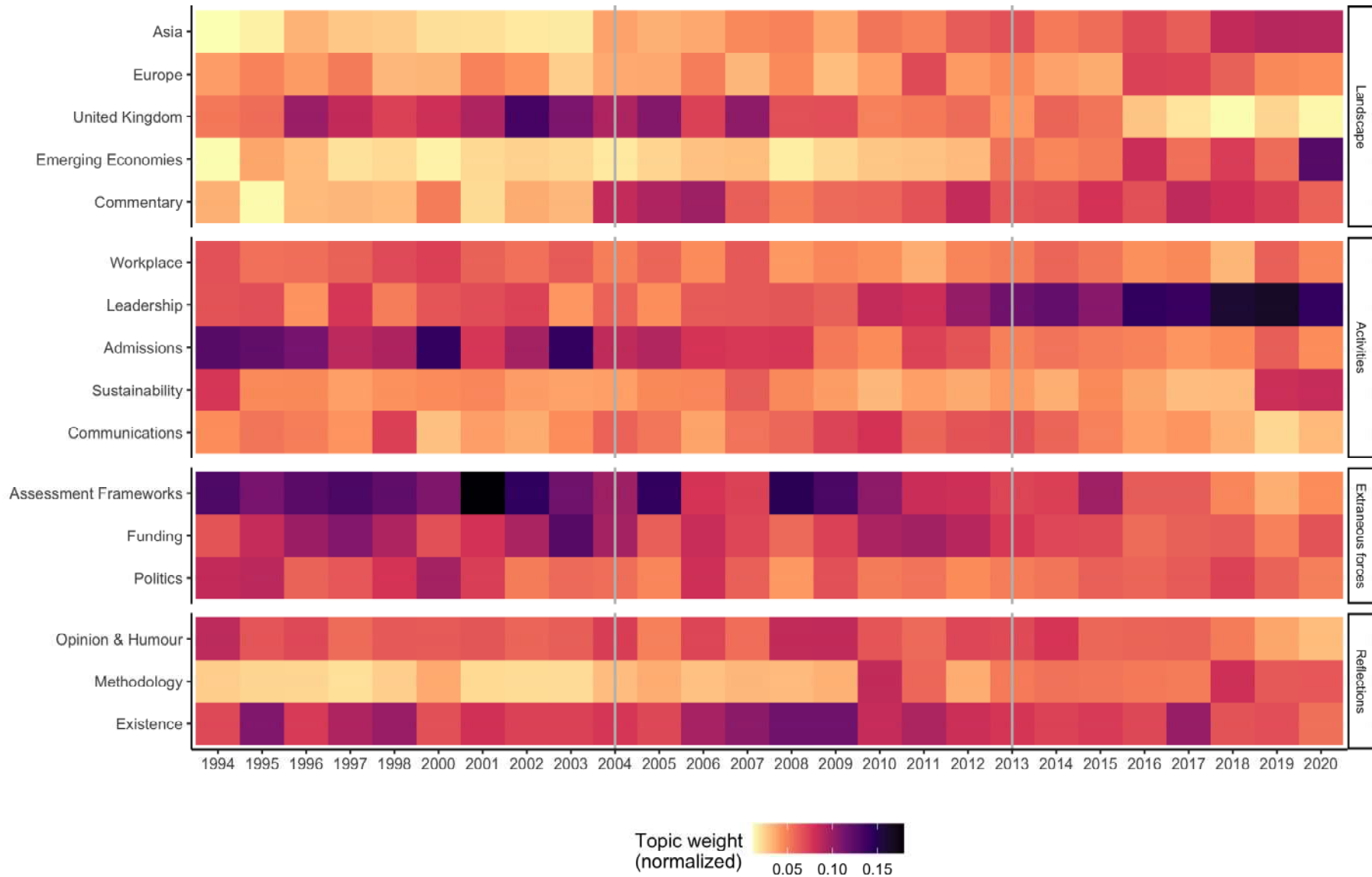
- LDA topic modelling (Mohr et al., 2013)
- Target number for topics is 16
- 4 broader themes (Gaby & Caren, 2016)

# Themes



	Topic	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4	Term 5	Term 6	Term 7	Term 8	Term 9	Term 10	Headline examples
Landscape	Commentary	harvard (0.0198)	representative (0.0095)	berkeley (0.0075)	fourth (0.0073)	harvard_university (0.007)	dominate (0.0068)	found (0.0067)	california (0.0066)	pillar (0.0063)	mit, caltech (0.0059)	"Golden state surfs crest of high-tech wave" (2010) "Young guns from Oz pull ahead of pack" (2015) "China's stars shine brighter in rankings" (2015)
	Emerging Economies	brazil (0.0153)	russia (0.0145)	russian (0.0105)	africa (0.0097)	pandemic (0.0097)	turkey (0.0084)	internationalisation (0.0073)	latin_america (0.007)	covid-19 (0.007)	south_africa (0.0067)	"Black rule hits league tables; South Africa" (1995) "Universities prove their value in a difficult year" (2020) "In search of education's El Dorado" (2017)
	United Kingdom	sir (0.0131)	scotland (0.0113)	england (0.0098)	merger (0.0079)	scottish (0.0075)	ucl (0.0073)	the_russell_group (0.0068)	wales (0.0067)	manchester (0.0066)	lse (0.0061)	"Frugal Few Fly As Others Fall" (2001) "Imperial reclaims crown as research income king" (2014) "Cambridge pips Oxford to the post in fourth annual 'Table of tables'" (2011)
	Europe	germany (0.0186)	french (0.0175)	france (0.0166)	eu (0.0164)	german (0.0119)	netherlands (0.0094)	canada (0.009)	switzerland (0.0079)	spain (0.0068)	dutch (0.0067)	"In race to top, France bids adieu to egalite" (2011) "Why has research in the EU13 countries not caught up with the west?" (2018) "Continental drift: recovery or slump?" (2014)
	Asia	chinese (0.0328)	india (0.0265)	japan (0.0202)	foreign (0.0184)	asia (0.0165)	singapore (0.0146)	australian (0.0124)	japanese (0.0123)	hong_kong (0.0116)	indian (0.0104)	"A closed book to outsiders" (2008) "A superhighway to success" (2019) "Chinese progress yet to turn tide" (2017)
Activities	Communications	online (0.0226)	brand (0.0209)	website (0.0125)	marketing (0.0121)	publisher (0.0074)	site (0.0074)	alumnus (0.0073)	web (0.0066)	mba (0.0064)	communication (0.0064)	"All about me, dot com" (2010) "'Frankensite' monsters loom as universities lose control of content" (2010) "Futurelearn picks league table stars for debut line-up" (2012)
	Sustainability	climate (0.0099)	physics (0.0097)	computer (0.0097)	environmental (0.0088)	energy (0.0085)	space (0.0085)	medical (0.0079)	chemistry (0.0078)	sustainability (0.0074)	sdg (0.006)	"UK and Canadian universities lead world on sustainability" (2019) "How green is my tally?" (2009) "Climate of consent" (2015)
	Admissions	qualification (0.0135)	admission (0.0129)	applicant (0.0118)	employment (0.0117)	exam (0.0104)	participation (0.0102)	test (0.0102)	background (0.0099)	entry (0.0098)	liberal (0.0084)	"Top State Students Miss Out On Elite Places" (2004) "A sensible selection tool" (2018) "Raw deal for BME students?" (2014)
	Leadership	engagement (0.0084)	diversity (0.0061)	strategic (0.0055)	leadership (0.005)	diverse (0.0046)	capacity (0.0043)	enable (0.0041)	innovative (0.004)	structure (0.004)	vision (0.0039)	"Navigating fast-flowing waters" (2013) "The graduate, re-engineered" (2018) "A global beacon" (2016)
	Workplace	woman (0.0326)	contract (0.0163)	female (0.0136)	gender (0.0125)	respondent (0.0097)	man (0.0091)	union (0.0082)	tenure (0.0079)	male (0.0075)	earn (0.0074)	"Fixed-term work is now the norm for early career academics, says UCU" (2016) "Pounds 130m Needed To Bridge Pay Divide" (2001) "Gender still on the agenda" (2013)
Extraneous Forces	Politics	freedom (0.0124)	party (0.0088)	politic (0.0059)	speech (0.0056)	protest (0.0052)	official (0.0051)	war (0.005)	election (0.005)	police (0.0049)	vote (0.0049)	"The lines on free speech are becoming blurred" (2015) "Dean sacked 'Soviet' style" (2006) "Karolinska Institute scandal: the system or the surgeon?" (2016)
	Funding	charge (0.0102)	loan (0.0089)	spending (0.0072)	price (0.0064)	debt (0.0063)	cash (0.0061)	finance (0.0059)	profit (0.0051)	cap (0.0048)	tax (0.0047)	"In the shake-up to come, no guarantees for anyone" (2010) "Cuts focus money-spinning minds" (1996) "Dark money matter: the cash is there but scientists can't see it" (2013)
	Assessment Frameworks	rae (0.015)	ref (0.0144)	metric (0.0123)	panel (0.012)	submit (0.0106)	submission (0.0081)	external (0.0079)	rating (0.007)	tef (0.0067)	hefce (0.0064)	"Research Intelligence - REF guidance sets up the starting blocks" (2011) "Rankled By Rankings" (2002) "Elite Attacks 'unreliable' TQA" (2001)
Reflections	Existence	argument (0.0041)	theory (0.0039)	modern (0.0037)	literature (0.0036)	wrong (0.0036)	philosophy (0.0035)	else (0.0032)	actually (0.0029)	understanding (0.0028)	writing (0.0028)	"Magic moments - We've lost those" (2008) "Go To Aisle 4 To Pick Up Your 2:1" (2006) "Failure is an option" (2016)
	Methodology	category (0.0255)	ratio (0.0176)	volume (0.0174)	index (0.0148)	data (0.0146)	normalise (0.013)	examine (0.0112)	database (0.0111)	thomson_reuters (0.0109)	transfer (0.0101)	"Bespoke figures" (2019) "Firm foundations New rankings, same method" (2013) "Adjusted figures" (2018)
	Opinion & Humour	child (0.0081)	sport (0.0069)	room (0.0052)	day (0.0052)	lecture (0.0044)	man (0.0043)	american (0.0039)	bit (0.0037)	football (0.0037)	friend (0.0034)	"He's in the money!" (2010) "Parallel lives" (2006) "Now raise a plastic glass..." (2015)

# Scenes



**Fig. 1.** Heatmap of topic frequency over year, with topic weights normalized over total of weights per year, i.e., they total 1 in each period (Goldstone, 2021; Wieringa, 2017). The lines in 2004 and 2013 correspond to the launch of the *World University Rankings* and the beginning of the spin-off rankings, respectively. 1999 is omitted since there is no data for that year.

# Scenes

Coverage moves from a British higher education sector beset with **national** concerns to a **global hierarchy**.

Coverage begins to focus on:

- a) factors internal to universities that contribute to league positioning,
- b) the new regions in the expanded rankings market,
- c) explaining their methodology.

Scene - Agent  
(topic) - (subject)

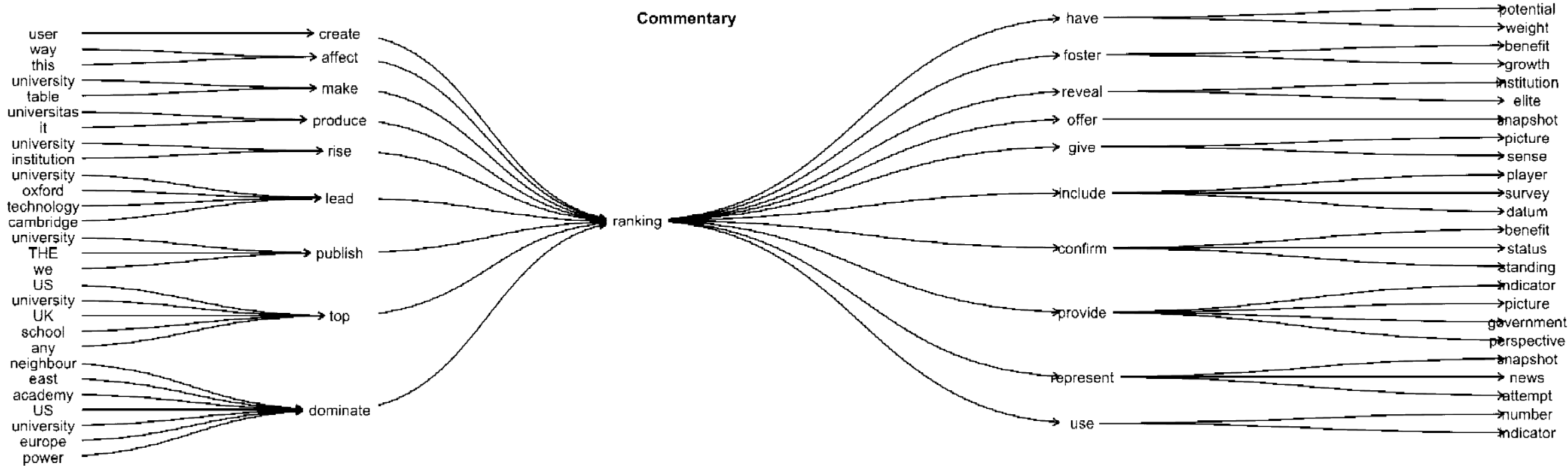
	<i>Landscape</i>				<i>Activities</i>				<i>Extraneous Forces</i>				<i>Reflections</i>		
<b>Commentary</b> <i>(19:100)</i>	<b>Emerging Economies</b> <i>(24:100)</i>	<b>United Kingdom</b> <i>(24:100)</i>	<b>Europe</b> <i>(24:100)</i>	<b>Asia</b> <i>(20:100)</i>	<b>Communications</b> <i>(26:100)</i>	<b>Sustainability</b> <i>(29:100)</i>	<b>Admissions</b> <i>(20:100)</i>	<b>Leadership</b> <i>(18:100)</i>	<b>Workplace</b> <i>(22:100)</i>	<b>Politics</b> <i>(30:100)</i>	<b>Funding</b> <i>(19:100)</i>	<b>Assessment Frameworks</b> <i>(17:100)</i>	<b>Existence</b> <i>(22:100)</i>	<b>Methodology</b> <i>(14:100)</i>	<b>Opinion &amp; Humour</b> <i>(32:100)</i>
university	university	university	university	university	university	university	student	university	university	university	university	university	student	indicator	university
institution	institution	institution	student	student	student	institution	university	student	academic	student	student	institution	university	institution	student
US	student	student	institution	institution	institution	student	institution	institution	staff	institution	government	student	academic	university	people
UK	country	number	UK	china	people	people	college	ranking	institution	government	institution	academic	people	category	one
table	government	table	government	governme nt	academic	research	people	government	woman	academic	fee	result	institution	datum	academic
ranking	number	group	country	country	ranking	academic	per_cent	people	per_cent	people	education	council	one	income	institution
student	china	figure	system	number	journal	per_cent	government	education	salary	one	report	department	government	ranking	many
country	ranking	staff	academic	india	one	one	report	country	figure	report	system	report	many	score	thing
harvard	academic	oxford	people	education	school	researcher	number	research	student	many	people	system	research	citation	per_cent
institute	many	government	researcher	japan	brand	work	school	academic	people	number	UK	ranking	education	survey	school
china	per_cent	result	number	ranking	course	science	education	one	chancellor	college	number	research	number	reuters	study
one	system	people	one	academic	education	staff	system	many	survey	per_cent	cost	one	per_cent	point	education
datum	people	academic	funding	system	research	institute	graduate	number	pay	party	sector	number	system	weighting	chancellor
people	education	cambridge	per_cent	people	system	many	study	programme	one	education	academic	panel	work	measure	college
berkeley	russia	chancellor	reform	many	reputation	scientist	result	system	report	staff	many	government	thing	research	work
number	nation	college	education	report	publisher	project	course	model	lecturer	member	research	group	result	proportion	number
result	brazil	many	many	per_cent	branding	UK	one	challenge	professor	council	funding	staff	league table	academic	staff
london	one	scotland	ranking	one	number	ranking	figure	per_cent	leader	chancellor	one	study	ranking	per_cent	life
nation	researcher	merger	brexit	marginso n	result	study	many	strategy	member	union	figure	datum	study	table	parent
academic	report	research	report	altbach	website	government	research	change	many	system	chancellor	league table	problem	rankings	child

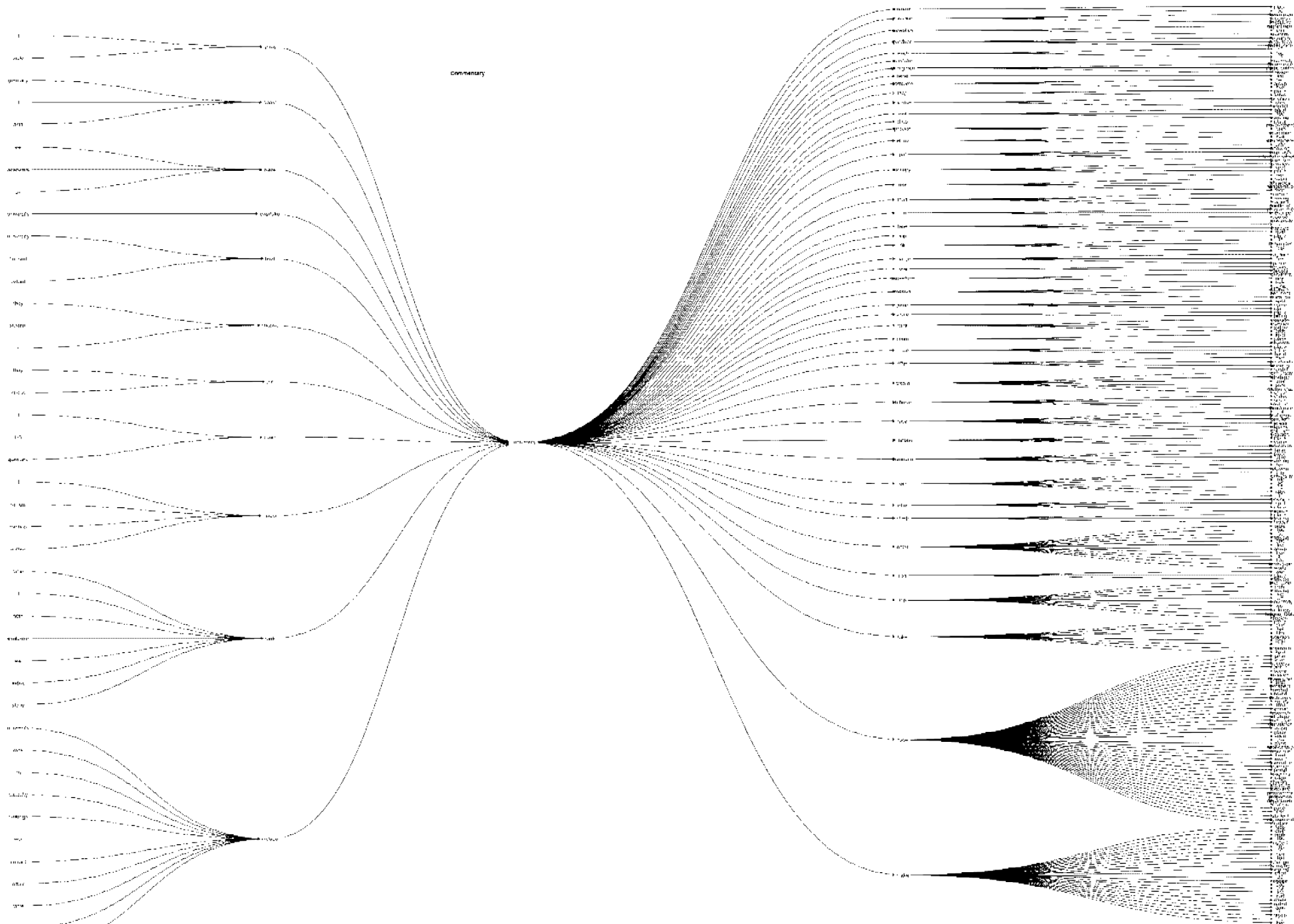


Scene - Act - Agent  
(topic) - (verb) - (subject)

# Scene-act-agent

- We pull out subject-verb-object triplets
  - The triplets are visualised in dendrograms as
    - subject – verb – [object/subject] – verb – object



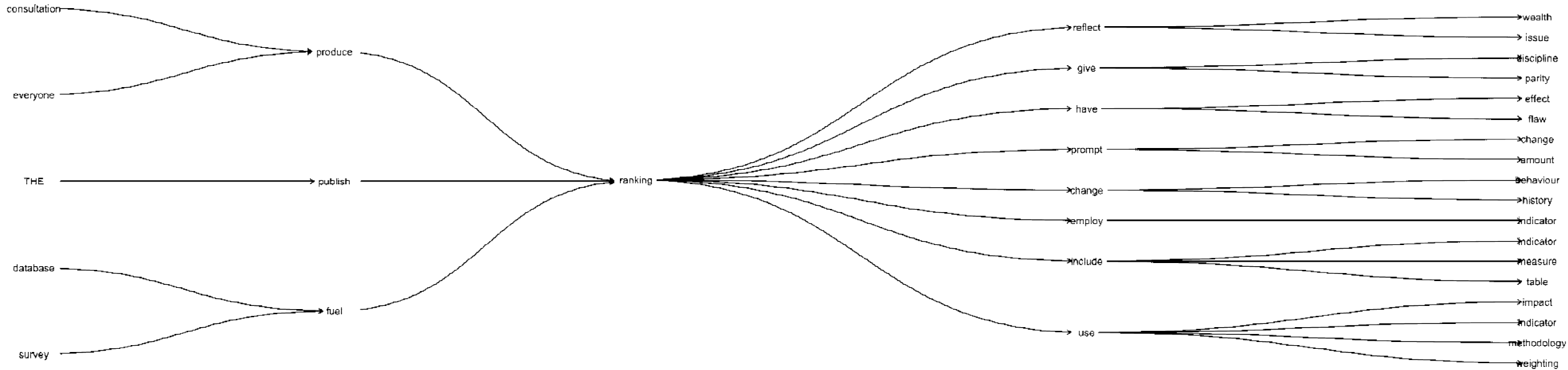


- Universities spring to life
  - ‘overtake / beat’ each other
  - ‘rise,’ ‘drop,’ ‘reach,’ ‘leap,’ ‘exit,’ ‘jump,’ ‘climb,’ or ‘top,’ in rank.
- The scene reads as a type of spectacle
  - Some universities ‘lead’ and others ‘slip’ in a metaphoric race.
  - Challenges must be overcome: ‘universities... face... cuts / challenges / decline / problem / stress / criticism’
  - Improvements are rewarded with a rise in the hierarchy.
- Universities are also acted upon or with
  - ‘evaluators... rank’ them, ‘rankings... showcase’ them, ‘casualties... include’ them, and ‘Harvard... beats’ them.

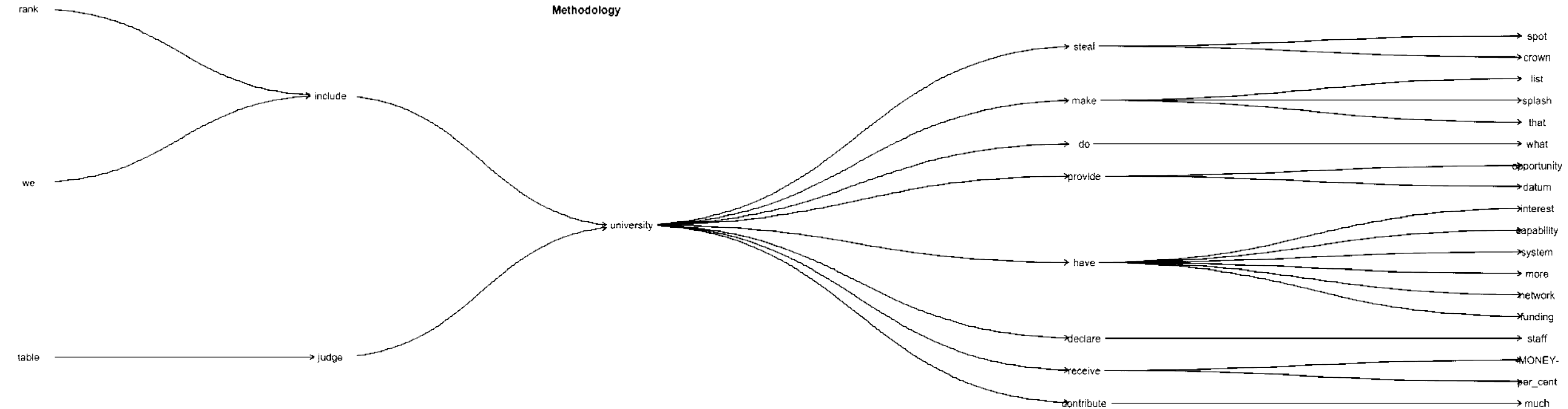
# Orchestrating a spectacle

- The Commentary scene secures an audience by orchestrating a spectacle
  - Commentary scene casts universities in a metaphoric race
  - It effectively 'V-Charges' "the remaking of higher education as a global enterprise" (Robertson, 2019b)

Methodology



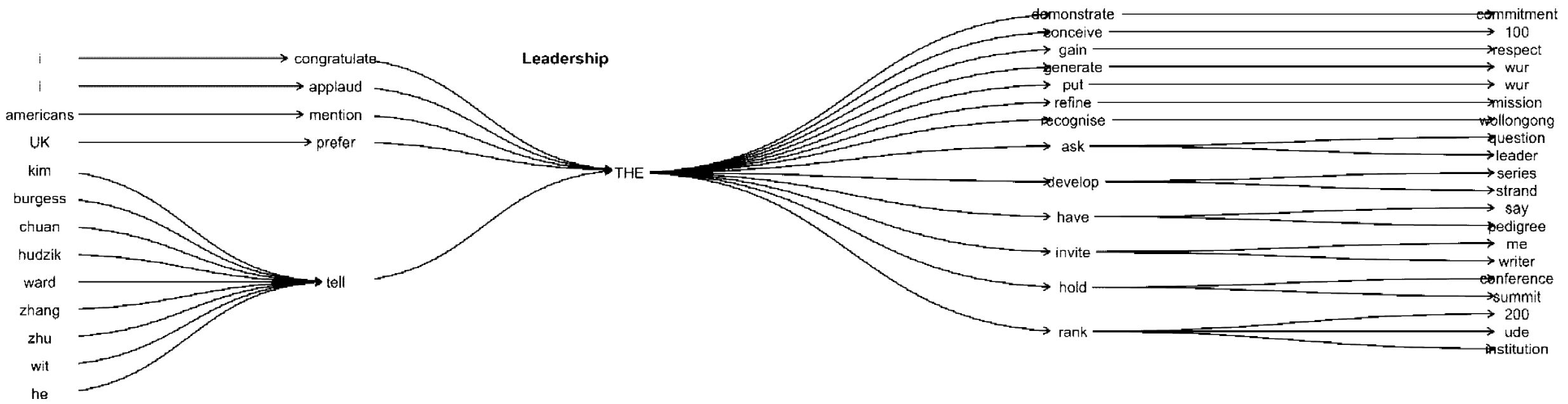
Methodology



# Legitimising THE ranking

- The Methodology scene legitimises THE's ranking activities
  - Intensifies after 2009 as THE breaks with QS
  - Important for expansion of the WUR from 2013 onwards
  - Brings in agents alongside THE in the rankings production





# Reflections & conclusion

# What does the future hold?

Le Monde & Ce Continents

18 bis la Fabrique Bachelard, 18  
PARIS 10<sup>e</sup>

# L'Auto

AUTOMOBILE - CYCLISME

ATHLETISME, YACHTING, AEROSTATION, ESCRIME, POIDS ET HALTERES, HIPPISME, GYMNASTIQUE, ALPINISME

## LE TOUR DE FRANCE - LE DÉPART

Organisé par L'AUTO du 1<sup>er</sup> au 19 Juillet 1903

### LA SEMENCE

Le Tour de France est une épreuve qui a été créée par M. Desgrange, directeur de L'Auto, et qui a pour but de réunir les meilleurs cyclistes de France et de l'étranger. Cette épreuve a été créée en 1903 et a depuis lors connu un grand succès. Elle est devenue une véritable fête nationale et attire chaque année des milliers de spectateurs. Les cyclistes qui participent à cette épreuve sont soumis à de grandes épreuves physiques et mentales. Ils doivent parcourir de longues distances, souvent dans des conditions difficiles, et doivent être capables de résister à la fatigue et à la chaleur. Les spectateurs qui suivent les cyclistes sont également soumis à de grandes épreuves physiques et mentales. Ils doivent rester debout pendant de longues heures, souvent dans des conditions difficiles, et doivent être capables de résister à la chaleur et à la fatigue. Les cyclistes qui participent à cette épreuve sont soumis à de grandes épreuves physiques et mentales. Ils doivent parcourir de longues distances, souvent dans des conditions difficiles, et doivent être capables de résister à la fatigue et à la chaleur. Les spectateurs qui suivent les cyclistes sont également soumis à de grandes épreuves physiques et mentales. Ils doivent rester debout pendant de longues heures, souvent dans des conditions difficiles, et doivent être capables de résister à la chaleur et à la fatigue.



**L'ITINÉRAIRE DU TOUR DE FRANCE**

Paris, Bordeaux, Nantes, Lille, Paris

Les cyclistes qui participent à cette épreuve sont soumis à de grandes épreuves physiques et mentales. Ils doivent parcourir de longues distances, souvent dans des conditions difficiles, et doivent être capables de résister à la fatigue et à la chaleur. Les spectateurs qui suivent les cyclistes sont également soumis à de grandes épreuves physiques et mentales. Ils doivent rester debout pendant de longues heures, souvent dans des conditions difficiles, et doivent être capables de résister à la chaleur et à la fatigue.

### QUI ?


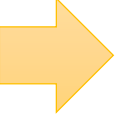

Les cyclistes qui participent à cette épreuve sont soumis à de grandes épreuves physiques et mentales. Ils doivent parcourir de longues distances, souvent dans des conditions difficiles, et doivent être capables de résister à la fatigue et à la chaleur. Les spectateurs qui suivent les cyclistes sont également soumis à de grandes épreuves physiques et mentales. Ils doivent rester debout pendant de longues heures, souvent dans des conditions difficiles, et doivent être capables de résister à la chaleur et à la fatigue.



Les cyclistes qui participent à cette épreuve sont soumis à de grandes épreuves physiques et mentales. Ils doivent parcourir de longues distances, souvent dans des conditions difficiles, et doivent être capables de résister à la fatigue et à la chaleur. Les spectateurs qui suivent les cyclistes sont également soumis à de grandes épreuves physiques et mentales. Ils doivent rester debout pendant de longues heures, souvent dans des conditions difficiles, et doivent être capables de résister à la chaleur et à la fatigue.

Les cyclistes qui participent à cette épreuve sont soumis à de grandes épreuves physiques et mentales. Ils doivent parcourir de longues distances, souvent dans des conditions difficiles, et doivent être capables de résister à la fatigue et à la chaleur. Les spectateurs qui suivent les cyclistes sont également soumis à de grandes épreuves physiques et mentales. Ils doivent rester debout pendant de longues heures, souvent dans des conditions difficiles, et doivent être capables de résister à la chaleur et à la fatigue.

# Conclusion

-  *THE's* coverage should be contextualized in its shift from relying on subscription and advertising revenues, to developing rankings and derivative services as products in their own right.
-  *THE's* engages strategically with the ambiguous relationship it constructs to its readers. Analysing and documenting such engagement over time holds value.
-  The dramatic appeal of newsworthiness might be as key to the mundanity of the rankings (Brankovic, 2021) as their purported truthfulness.

Thank you!

**Morten Hansen | [@Hansen\\_edu](#)**

**Astrid Van den Bossche | [@askebos](#)**