

# From Metrics to Meaning: How Global Rankings Challenge the Humanities

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UK universities

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# Majority of British universities slip down global rankings

Chinese, Indian and south-east Asian institutions climb the annual list



Students graduating from LSE. The university has dropped from 50th to 56th in the global rankings © Charlie Bibby/FT

Amy Borrett in London

Published 13 HOURS AGO

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Amy Borrett

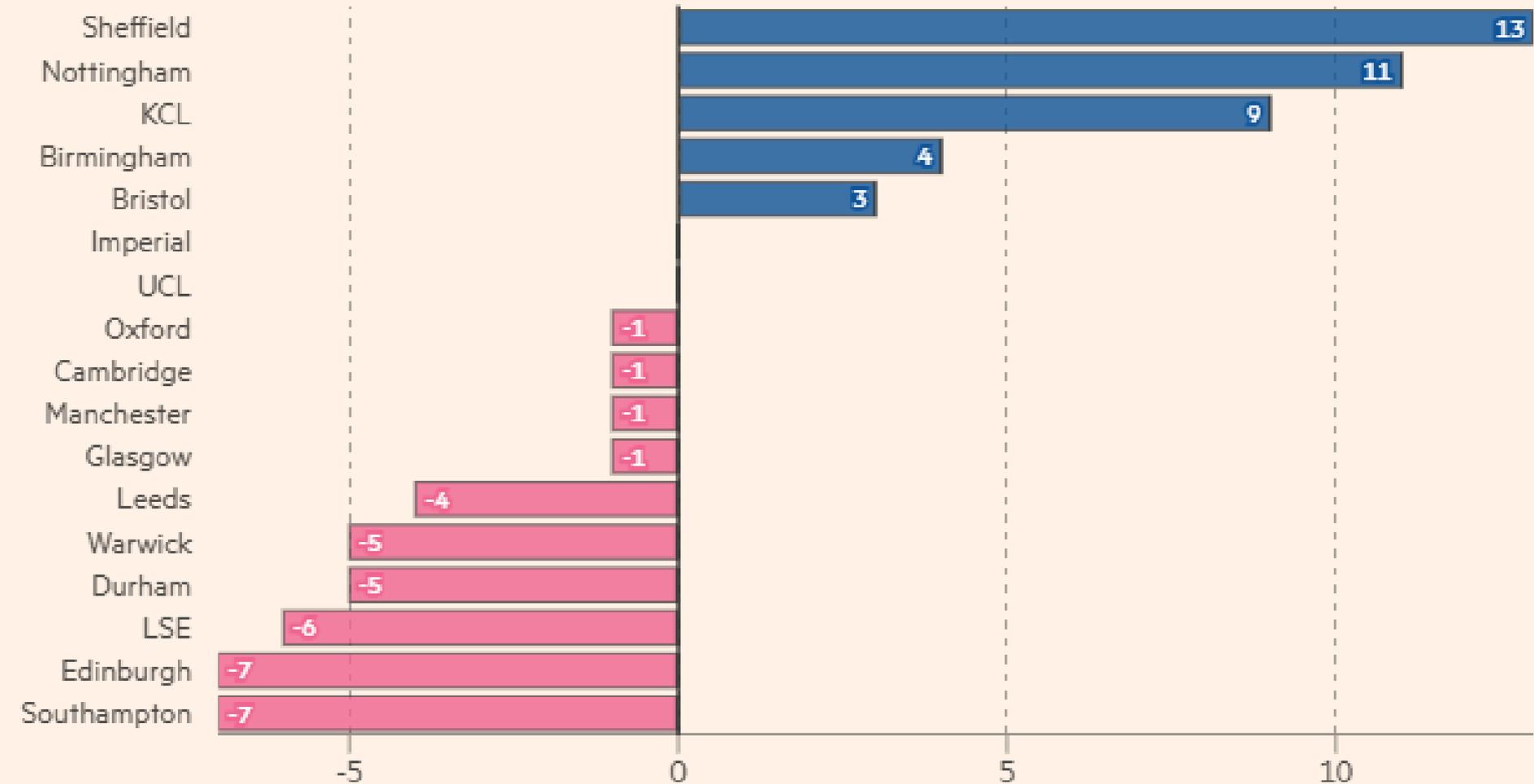
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Thursday, June 19, 2025

## Some of the UK's top universities have slipped down the rankings

Change in position in the past year for UK universities ranked in the global top 100



# The Rankings Paradigm

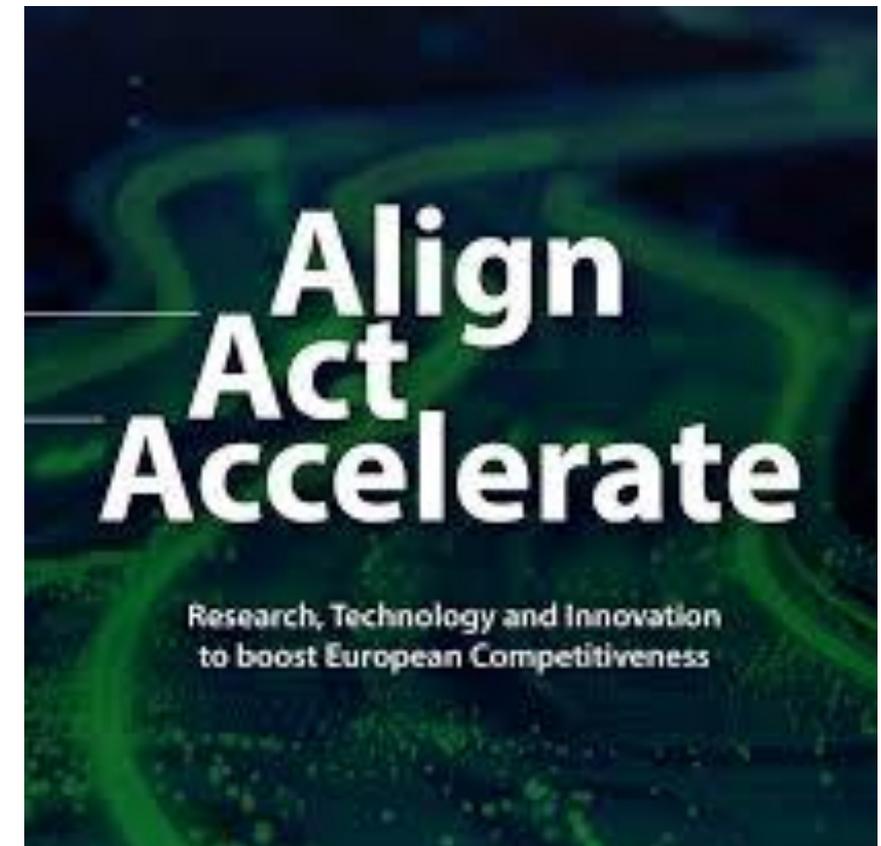
- **Quantification**  
Diverse and complex academic cultures are reduced to a single number
- **Monoculture**  
Diverse working practices, communication styles, thematic focus, and cultural contexts lead to varied outcomes in ranking. (e.g. policy reports vs. scientific articles)
- **STEM Dominance**  
Citation metrics ('top'-journals), research practices (larger teams, more doctoral candidates), and recognition practices (Nobel Prizes) favor STEM over Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH)
- **Circle of prestige & Matthew effect**  
Rankings are based on and create a hierarchy of perceived excellence.



# Rankings are not neutral

- • Rankings claim objectivity, but every indicator is based on a choice:
  - Citations = Success in a certain publication system.
  - International students = success in a “student market”, not intercultural experience.
  - Number of doctoral candidates = lab settings
  - Changes in Methodology strongly affect outcomes: (e.g. LSE dramatically dropped from 11th (2004–05) to 86th (2010))
- Research volume = major funding and major project
- What is measured is what is valued—but this leaves criteria like relevance, complexity, reflectivity and cultural diversity, out of the picture
- Humanities often fall outside this value system: slower production, local impact, smaller volumes, non-English output, strong differences within disciplines.
- This makes ranking much more a political- than a scientific tool.

# Rankings in the context of the competitiveness agenda – will we miss them?



# Opportunities for new alliances

- While rankings claim to be based on science-related criteria, the **competitiveness agenda risks to focus on marketable products.**
- In this regards, the competitiveness agenda could be understood as a “**radicalisation**” of the ranking approach.
- Humanities are under a **double threat**
- However, **rankings can also serve as a self-reflection tool** within the disciplines about how to increase visibility and impact
- Opening **spaces for new alliances** including with STEM actors



# 4 CORE COMMITMENTS



1. **Recognise the diversity of contributions** to, and careers in, research, in accordance with the needs and the 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 the inappropriate uses in research assessment of journal- and publication-based metrics**, in particular the inappropriate uses of journal impact factor (JIF) and h-index.
4. **Avoid the use of rankings of research organisations** in research assessment.

# COARA as an opportunity



1. **Based on the institutional choice to change the system**

Universities face a strategic decision about what is their value and impact

2. **Promotion of cultural changes**

COARA promotes contextual evaluation over rankings. No one fits it all approach, content over quantity

3. **Leadership of the humanities**

Humanities may already have found some alternatives

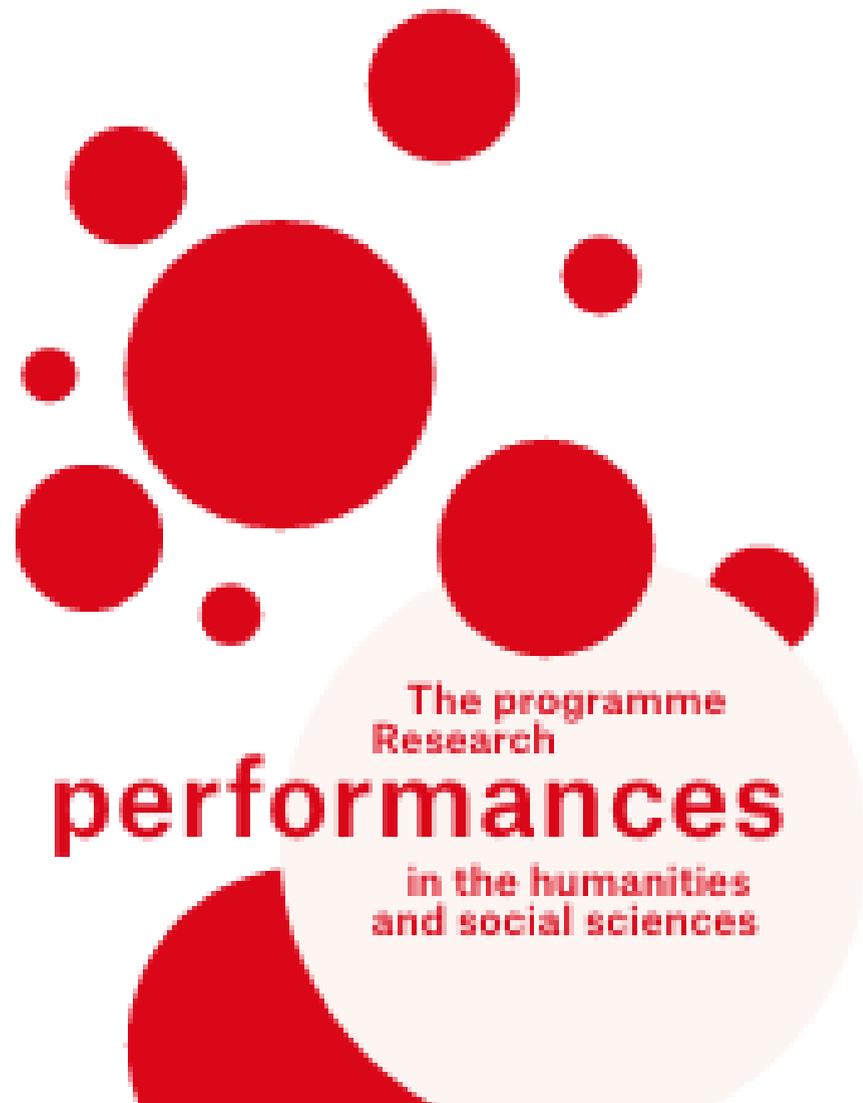
# How to build appropriate (e)valuations:

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- 1. Disciplinary diversity:**  
Evaluation must reflect different publication formats, languages, and authorship cultures between and within disciplines
- 2. Institutional context matters:**  
Goals and missions vary among institutions – evaluation must be fit for purpose.
- 3. Bottom-up design:**  
Researchers should shape evaluation criteria from the beginning and have a say about what counts
- 4. Transparency is essential:**  
Purpose, methods, and consequences must be clear and open.
- 5. Clear objectives:**  
Make clear what is being assessed and why – before collecting

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The programme  
Research

performances

in the humanities  
and social sciences

**6. Meaningful metrics:**

Quantitative indicators support, but never replace, peer review.

**7. Impact is plural:**

Humanities engage society in complex, indirect, wholistic and lasting ways.

**8. Context first:**

The use of evaluation tool needs to keep in mind the context it takes place – what works in one place, doesn't in another

**9. Value and visibility evolve over time**

Research effects often emerge years after publication.

**10. Quality standards apply to evaluation too:**

Evaluation must itself be rigorous, reflective, and open to scrutiny.



Thank you very much!

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