

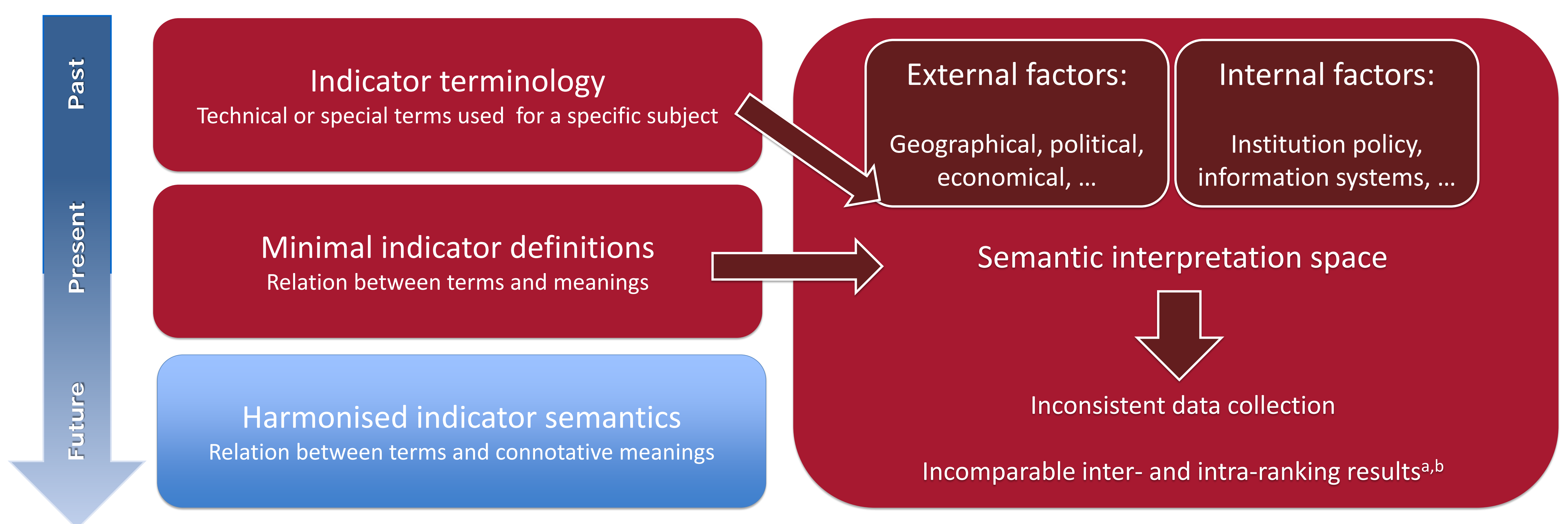
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Introduction

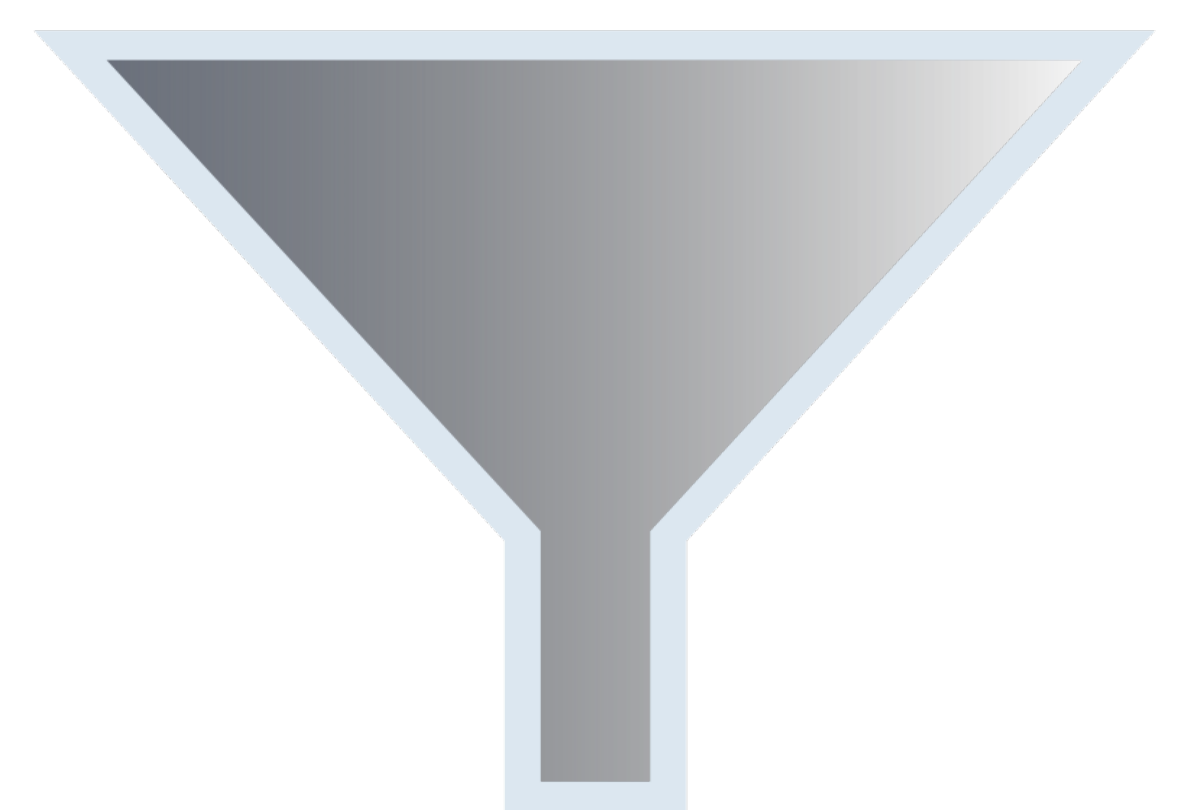
Over the past decade university rankings have become increasingly popular resulting in a broad variety of end-users ranging from policymakers to researchers, students and their parents. Although ranking results presented by a single rank score seem to be easily interpretable, many caveats have been drawn with regards to the indicators, their accompanying semantics as well as the methodologies used for data collection. In many cases, the semantic content of the indicators is poorly defined, leaving a grey zone that allows universities to collect data according to their own interpretation. This, together with differences in the local context of a university, results in a great variety in the data used, and thus impedes a reliable comparison of universities.

Indicator semantics



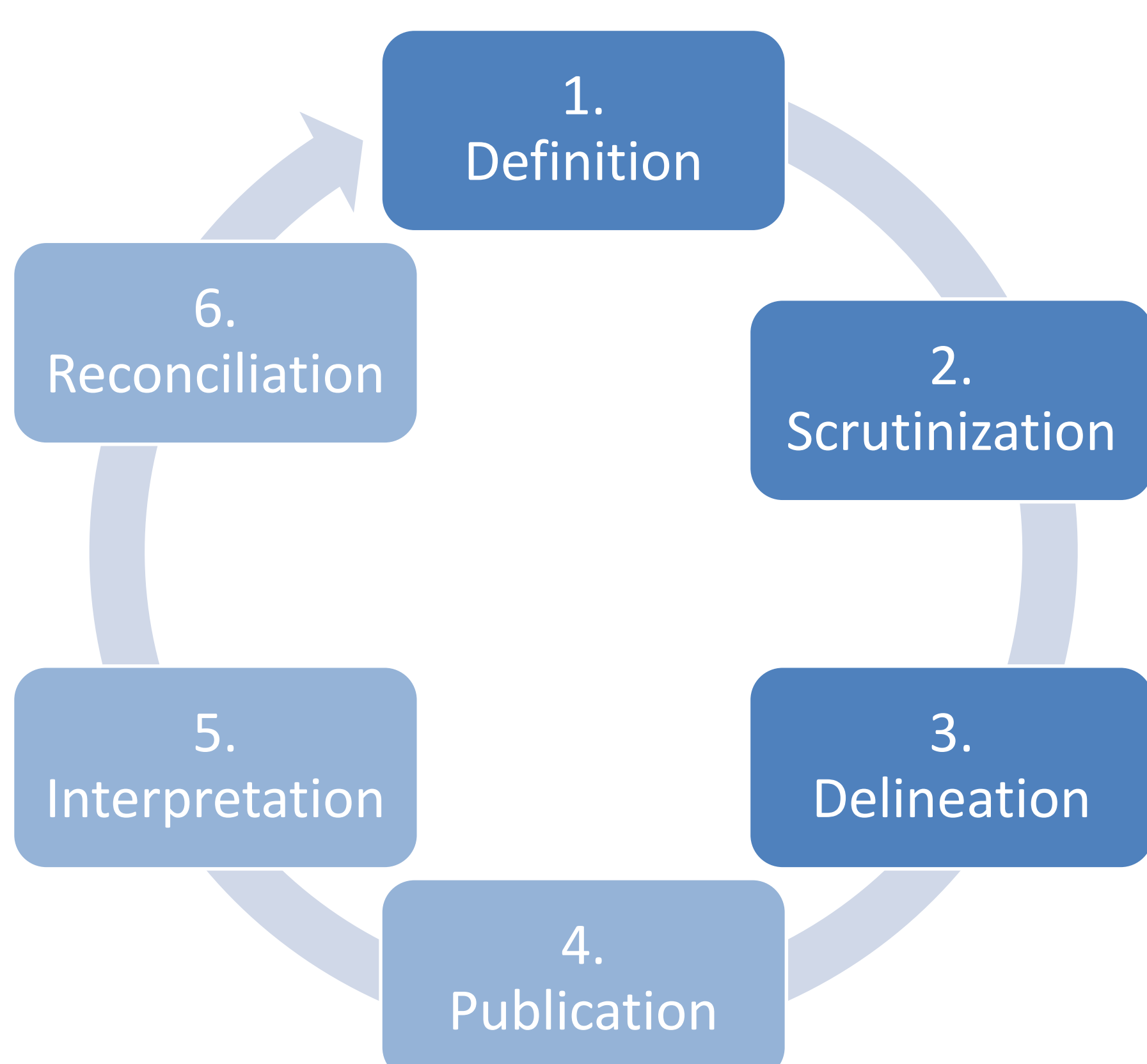
Methodology

1. Ranking organisations define the relation between indicators and denotations in consultancy with institutions
2. Scrutinizing indicator semantics by each institution individually: technical and business experts
3. Delineating common framework of indicator semantics
4. Publishing institution specific semantics on ranking website
5. Data interpretation of ranking results takes institution specific semantics into account
6. Semantic reconciliation upon change in definition at the side of the ranking or at the side of the institution



Example: U-Multirank

To overcome semantic variability in data collection, four Flemish universities accommodated the semantic interpretation of the indicators in U-Multirank. In this example the semantic variability in the indicator “foreign language bachelor/master programmes” is addressed.



1. U-Multirank definition:
“The number of programmes that lead to a degree offered in a foreign language. To be counted as a foreign language programme, 80% of the programme should be taught in the foreign language.”

2. Situation in Belgium:
- universities are restricted in the amount of foreign language bachelor/master courses
- some institutions only register data in line with national definition (≠ U-Multirank definition)
→ Diversity in data collection among Flemish universities

3. To correctly comparing ranking results in Flanders:
- Flemish universities collectively agree, together with U-Multirank, to deviate from the U-Multirank definition and the national definition
- joint decisions about semantic interpretation and data collection are registered^c

4 to 6. These steps still need to be established.

References

- ^aPoelmans, H., Vancauwenbergh, S. (2016). Over interpretatie en misinterpretatie van universitaire rankings. Tijdschrift voor onderwijsrecht en onderwijsbeleid, 2-3, 146-154.
^bPoelmans, H.*, Vancauwenbergh, S.* (2017). Leidraad voor het wikken en wegen van rankingresultaten, Thema, accepted. *Both authors are joint first authors.
^cECOOM-UHasselt in samenwerking met de Vlaamse universiteiten en VLIR (2017). Draaiboek: Concretisering van semantiek van U-Multirank indicatoren voor Vlaanderen. In preparation.