

# Finding the best learning to rank algorithms for effort-aware defect prediction

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Software defect prediction

Empirical study

Learning to rank

Ranking instability

## ABSTRACT

**Context:** Effort-Aware Defect Prediction (EADP) ranks software modules or changes based on their predicted number of defects (i.e., considering modules or changes as effort) or defect density (i.e., considering LOC as effort) by using learning to rank algorithms. Ranking instability refers to the inconsistent conclusions produced by existing empirical studies of EADP. The major reason is the poor experimental design, such as comparison of few *learning to rank* algorithms, the use of small number of datasets or datasets without indicating numbers of defects, and evaluation with inappropriate or few metrics.

**Objective:** To find a stable ranking of *learning to rank* algorithms to investigate the best ones for EADP,

**Method:** We examine the practical effects of 34 algorithms on 49 datasets for EADP. We measure the performance of these algorithms using 7 module-based and 7 LOC-based metrics and run experiments under cross-release and cross-project settings, respectively. Finally, we obtain the ranking of these algorithms by performing the Scott-Knott ESD test.

**Results:** When module is used as effort, random forest regression performs the best under cross-release setting, and linear regression performs the best under cross-project setting among the *learning to rank* algorithms; (2) when LOC is used as effort, LTR-linear (Learning-to-Rank with the linear model) performs the best under cross-release setting, and Ranking SVM performs the best under cross-project setting.

**Conclusion:** This comprehensive experimental procedure allows us to discover a stable ranking of the studied algorithms to select the best ones according to the requirement of software projects.

## 1. Introduction

Software Defect Prediction (SDP) has typically been modeled by training a binary classifier using historical software data, and predicts whether or not a new software module is defective [1,2]. However, conventional SDP models based on the binary classification do not account for defect densities of various software modules [3,4]. Consequently, software modules that have different defect densities are allocated with the same amount of testing resources. Therefore, Mende et al. [3] and Kamei et al. [4] proposed the Effort-Aware Defect Prediction (EADP) model to rank software modules according to the

predicted defect density. Specifically, they used the inspected Lines Of Code (LOC) as a proxy for effort. Recently, Yang et al. [5] proposed to rank software modules based on the predicted number of defects. They used the number of the inspected software modules as a proxy for effort. Therefore, in our study, we define EADP as a task of ranking software modules based on both the defect density (considering LOC as effort) and the number of defects (considering module as effort). The core component of EADP models is the learning to rank (henceforth, L2R) algorithm [5], which automatically constructs a ranking model using training data, such that the model can sort new software modules

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infsof.2023.107165>

Received 22 February 2022; Received in revised form 15 January 2023; Accepted 30 January 2023

Available online 2 February 2023

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according to their defect quantity or density. A good L2R algorithm can precisely rank software modules with more defects or higher defect density first, allowing software testers to find more defects with less inspection effort. Hence, selecting the best L2R algorithm becomes the key to build successful EADP models.

Although there have been extensive studies on searching for the best L2R algorithms [6–13], different researchers often provide inconsistent rankings of L2R algorithms, i.e., there is no consensus on what is the “best” L2R algorithm for building the EADP model. Nguyen et al. [6] found that RankBoost had more stable prediction performance. Bennin et al. [7,8] discovered that Decision Tree Regression (DTR) performed the best in cross-release settings. Wang et al. [10] found that RankNet performed the best regarding Normalized Discounted Cumulative Gain (NDCG) in the scenario of cross-project EADP. Miletic et al. [11] found that Logistic Regression (LogR) gained the best results in the scenario of cross-release EADP. Yang et al. [12] found that Random Forest Regression (RFR) can achieve better results under cross-release setting. Yan et al. [9] found that ManualUp did not perform statistically significantly better than some classification models and Linear Regression (LR) under within-project setting, and can perform statistically significantly better than them under cross-project setting. Ni et al. [13] found that some supervised algorithms can statistically significantly outperform ManualUp for cross-project EADP. Such inconsistent findings make it hard to derive practical guidelines about which learning to rank algorithms should be employed to build EADP models, and Menzies et al. [14] and Keung et al. [15,16] refer to the inconsistent findings as the ranking instability problem. Therefore, we aim to empirically investigate the selection of L2R algorithms for EADP and find the best ones. As suggested by Menzies et al. [14] and Keung et al. [15,16], three experimental conditions should be carefully controlled for a stable ranking result: (1) Variants of datasets are sufficient to draw a conclusion; (2) The procedure to sample the training/test modules is logical; (3) The performance measures are sufficient in amount and are valid. The primary aim of EADP is to find more defective modules and defects and obtain the accurate global ranking of software modules according to the number of defects or defect density. It is also important to consider that inspecting too many modules and LOC may result in increased effort. Furthermore, developers may be hesitant to utilize an EADP model if false alarms are high. As such, these three factors should be considered when evaluating an EADP model. Last but not least, developers are reluctant to use a EADP model if the false alarms are high. Therefore, the three aspects should be taken into consideration to evaluate a EADP model. However, we observed that results of existing studies tend to be impacted, presumably without fully respecting these experimental conditions, such as comparison of few L2R algorithms on small number of datasets, and evaluation with inappropriate or few performance measures.

To address the aforementioned issues, we aim to find a stable ranking of various L2R algorithms that are widely used in existing EADP studies through a comprehensive experimental design. We investigate 34 algorithms, including 31 L2R algorithms, two unsupervised learning algorithms (i.e., ManualUp and ManualDown) and the OneWay algorithm on 49 module-level datasets. We also compare these algorithms with 7 module-based and 7 LOC-based effort-aware performance measures under cross-release and cross-project settings. For more robust result analysis, we use the Scott-Knott with Cohen’s  $d$  effect size awareness (Scott-Knott ESD) [17] test to divide these algorithms into statistically distinct rankings. Compared with the existing empirical studies [6–13], we carefully control the three experimental conditions mentioned by Menzies and Keung et al. and evaluate more algorithms with a robust statistical test. This comprehensive experimental procedure allows us to draw stable conclusions about the performance of the algorithms.

The experimental results show that: (1) When using module as effort, ManualDown performs the best in terms of PofB@20%module (Proportion of the inspected Bugs when inspecting top 20% modules)

and  $P_{opt}@module$  under cross-release and cross-project settings. However, ManualDown requires the inspection of significantly more LOC than other algorithms when inspecting top 20% modules. (2) When using module as effort, RFR (Random Forest Regression) performs only behind ManualDown under cross-release setting, and LR (Linear Regression) performs only behind ManualDown and OneWay under cross-project setting in terms of PofB@20%module and  $P_{opt}@module$ . But RFR and LR require software testers to inspect significantly less LOC than ManualDown and OneWay. (3) When using LOC as effort, LTR-linear (Learning-to-Rank with the linear model) performs the best under cross-release setting, and Ranking SVM performs the best under cross-project setting in terms of PofB@20%LOC (Proportion of the inspected Bugs when inspecting top 20% Lines Of Code) and  $P_{opt}@LOC$  among those algorithms with low IFA (Initial False Alarms encountered before we find the first defect) values.

This paper is an extended version of our study published in SANER [18]. The **extensions** include the following updates:

(1) We enhance the experimental settings by using the more practical cross-release and cross-project validations. In addition, we employ more evaluation measures, i.e., Precision, Recall, IFA, PLI (Proportion of LOC Inspected), PMI (Proportion of Modules Inspected), PofB, PofB/PLI (ratio between PofB and PLI), and PofB/PMI (ratio between PofB and PMI) to comprehensively evaluate the performance of EADP models. The performance measures allow us to evaluate a EADP model comprehensively from the above-mentioned three aspects. In summary, compared with our SANER paper, the paper carefully controls the last two experimental conditions suggested by Menzies et al. [14] and Keung et al. [15,16] so that we can find a stable ranking of L2R algorithms.

(2) We investigate the performance of more L2R algorithms, including simple logistic, radial basis functions network, logistic model tree, ripper, ripple down rules, random forest regression, least angle regression, multivariate adaptive regression splines, and  $K^*$ , and compare the L2R algorithms with ManualUp, ManualDown, and OneWay. Compared with our SANER paper, we obtain additional experimental findings. Specifically, when module is considered as effort, ManualDown performs the best but requires the inspection of more LOC. Among the other models, RFR and LR achieve the best performance under cross-release and cross-project settings, respectively. When LOC is considered as effort, LTR-linear and Ranking SVM perform the best under cross-release and cross-project settings, respectively.

(3) We identify and analyze a set of 24 primary module-level EADP studies, and further discuss the differences between our work and previous studies.

(4) We give some implications based on our experimental results and provide a few suggestions to practitioners and researchers in the field of EADP.

Our **contributions** can be summarized as follows.

- We make a comprehensive comparison of 34 algorithms for EADP using 7 module-based and 7 LOC-based performance measures under cross-release and cross-project settings. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first large-scale study of finding a stable ranking of L2R algorithms for EADP.
- We identify and analyze a set of 24 primary studies related to module-level EADP published until 2022 from different perspectives, including the used datasets, L2R algorithms, evaluation measures, and ranking criterion. Community can use this set as a starting point to conduct further research on EADP. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first work to conduct a systematic literature review of EADP studies.
- We provide suggestions and guidelines based on our findings to encourage further research in the field of EADP.

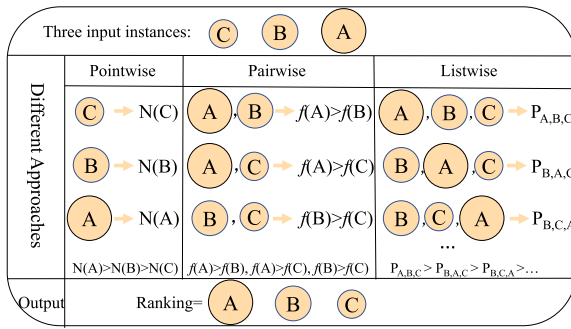


Fig. 1. An overview of the three types of L2R algorithms.

## 2. Background

Let  $m_i = (x_i, y_i)$  denote a software module, where  $x_i = (x_{i1}, x_{i2}, \dots, x_{im})$  is a  $m$ -dimensional software feature vector of the  $i$ th module, and  $y_i$  is the number of defects of the corresponding module. A software module dataset containing both defective and non-defective modules can be represented as:

$$S = \{m_1, m_2, \dots, m_n\}, \quad (1)$$

where  $n$  is the number of modules in  $S$ . The goal of EADP is to train a prediction model from  $S$  in order to rank new modules according to the predicted number of defects or defect density. In the following, we briefly introduce the studied 34 algorithms, including 31 L2R algorithms, two unsupervised learning algorithms, and the OneWay algorithm. The 31 L2R algorithms cover three families, including 24 pointwise L2R algorithms (12 classification-based pointwise algorithms and 12 regression-based pointwise algorithms), 4 pairwise algorithms, and 3 listwise algorithms. Fig. 1 shows an overview of the three types of L2R algorithms, and Table 1 provides an overview of the 31 L2R algorithms. Following Tantithamthavorn et al. [19], when the candidate parameter values of the learning to algorithms are not unique, we use the grid search to tune parameters of the L2R algorithms to maximize the  $P_{opt}$  value, because  $P_{opt}$  evaluates the global ranking of EADP models. We set the number of iterations of SL, LMT, RankBoost, RankNet, LambdaRank, ListNet, and Coordinate Ascent as 500, 500, 300, 100, 100, 1500, and 25, since our preliminary experiments showed that more iterations of these algorithms did not result in significant improvement. Following You et al. [20] and Yang et al. [5], we set the feasible solution space to  $[-20, 20]$ , and set both population size and maximal generation to 100 for GP and LTR.

### 2.1. The pointwise algorithm

The pointwise algorithm ranks software modules by directly predicting the number of defects or defect density [21]. As shown in Fig. 1, there are three modules (i.e., A, B, and C) that need to be ranked. Assuming that the pointwise approach predicts that the number of defects in module A is  $N(A)$ , the number of defects in module B is  $N(B)$ , the number of defects in module C is  $N(C)$ , and  $N(A) > N(B) > N(C)$ , then the predicted ranking is  $A > B > C$ . According to different machine learning technologies used, the pointwise algorithm can be further divided into two subcategories: classification-based algorithms and regression-based algorithms [21]. The classification-based pointwise algorithm uses the classification technique to predict the possibility of a module being defective, and regards the possibility as the number of defects, while the regression-based algorithm uses the regression technique to directly predict the number of defects or defect density.

(1) Naive Bayes (NB) [22]: It is a classification algorithm based on the Bayes' theorem with the "naive" assumption that every pair of software features are independent.

(2) Logistic Regression (LogR) [23]: It is a classification algorithm to classify software modules into discrete outcomes. It maximizes the entropy of the labels conditioned on the software features with respect to the distribution.

(3) Simple Logistic (SL) [24]: It is a classifier for building linear logistic regression models. It uses LogitBoost [25] with simple regression functions as base learners for fitting the logistic models.

(4) Radial Basis Functions Network (RBFNet) [26]: It is an artificial neural network that uses radial basis functions as the activation functions. RBFNet's output is a linear combination of radial basis functions of the inputs and neuron parameters.

(5) Sequential Minimal Optimization (SMO) [27]: It is a support vector machines (SVM) classifier, which uses sequential minimal optimization to solve the quadratic programming (QP) problem during the training.

(6) Classification and Regression Tree (CART) [28]: It is a decision tree classifier, which partitions the training dataset into small segments using the Gini index, and labels these small segments with one of the class labels (i.e., defective or non-defective).

(7) C4.5 [29]: It is also a decision tree classifier, which partitions the training dataset into small segments using the information gain rather than the Gini index in CART.

(8) Logistic Model Tree (LMT) [24]: It is a classification model with an associated training algorithm that combines logistic regression and decision tree learning. It produces a logistic regression model at every node in the tree using the LogitBoost algorithm [25], and splits the node using the information gain.

(9) Random Forest (RF) [30]: It is an ensemble classifier that fits a number of decision tree classifiers on various subsets of the original dataset, and uses averaging to improve the predictive accuracy and control over-fitting.

(10) K-nearest Neighbors (KNN) [31]: It finds  $k$  training software modules closest to the new software module, and predicts the label of the new software module from these training modules.

(11) Repeated Incremental Pruning to Produce Error Reduction (Ripper) [32]: It is a propositional rule based algorithm that creates series of rules with pruning to remove the rules that lead to lower classification performance.

(12) Ripple Down Rules (Ridor) [33]: It is a rule-based decision tree algorithm, where the decision tree consists of four nodes: a classification, a predicate function, a true branch, and a false branch.

(13) Decision Tree Regression (DTR) [34]: It fits a regression model in the form of a decision tree structure by learning from the training dataset.

(14) Random Forest Regression (RFR) [35]: It is an ensemble regression model that fits a number of decision tree regression models on various subsets of the original dataset, and uses averaging to improve the predictive accuracy and control over-fitting.

(15) Linear Regression (LR) [36]. It trains a linear model:

$$y = f(\mathbf{b}, \mathbf{x}) = b_0 + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 + \dots + b_mx_m, \quad (2)$$

where  $\mathbf{b} = (b_0, b_1, \dots, b_m)$  represents a  $(m+1)$ -dimensional vector of regression coefficients,  $\mathbf{x} = (x_1, x_2, \dots, x_m)$  is a  $m$ -dimensional software feature vector of the module, and  $y$  is the predicted number of defects or defect density of the module. LR uses the least square method to find the optimal  $\mathbf{b}$  value by minimizing the following loss function:

$$\sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - f(\mathbf{b}, \mathbf{x}_i))^2, \quad (3)$$

where  $y_i$  is the actual number of defects or defect density of the  $i$ th module, and  $\mathbf{x}_i$  is the  $m$ -dimensional software feature vector of the  $i$ th module.

(16) Ridge Regression (RR) [37]: It trains the same linear model as LR, but uses the gradient descent approach to find the optimal  $\mathbf{b}$  value by minimizing the following loss function:

$$\sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - f(\mathbf{b}, \mathbf{x}_i))^2 + \lambda \|\mathbf{b}\|^2, \quad (4)$$

**Table 1**  
Parameter value overview of the L2R algorithms.

| Family                                  | Label     | Algorithm <sup>a</sup> | Parameter description <sup>b</sup>                               | Candidate parameter values<br>(Default value is in bold)                                                                                                                                    |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Classification based Pointwise Approach | Bayes     | C1                     | Naïve Bayes (NB)                                                 | [N] Laplace Correction (0 indicates no correction).<br><b>{0}</b>                                                                                                                           |
|                                         | Function  | C2                     | Logistic Regression (LogR)                                       | {0.1,0.01,0.001, <b>0.0001</b> ,0.00001}                                                                                                                                                    |
|                                         |           | C3                     | Simple Logistic (SL)                                             | <b>{500}</b>                                                                                                                                                                                |
|                                         |           | C4                     | Radial Basis Functions Network (RBFNet)                          | {0.1, <b>0.01</b> ,0.001, 0.0001, 0.00001}                                                                                                                                                  |
|                                         |           | C5                     | Sequential Minimal Optimization (SMO)                            | <b>{1}</b>                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|                                         | Tree      | C6                     | Classification and Regression Tree (CART)                        | {2,3,4,5,6}                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                                         |           | C7                     | C4.5                                                             | <b>{0.25}</b>                                                                                                                                                                               |
|                                         |           | C8                     | Logistic Model Tree (LMT)                                        | <b>{500}</b>                                                                                                                                                                                |
|                                         |           | C9                     | Random Forest (RF)                                               | <b>{10,20,30,40,50}</b>                                                                                                                                                                     |
|                                         | Lazy      | C10                    | K-Nearest Neighbors (KNN)                                        | {1,5,9,13,17}                                                                                                                                                                               |
|                                         | Rule      | C11                    | Repeated Incremental Pruning to Produce Error Reduction (Ripper) | <b>{1,2,3,4,5}</b>                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                                         |           | C12                    | Ripple Down Rules (Ridor)                                        | {2,6, <b>10</b> ,14,18}                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Regression based Pointwise Approach     | Tree      | R1                     | Decision Tree Regression (DTR)                                   | {2,3,4,5,6}                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                                         |           | R2                     | Random Forest Regression (RFR)                                   | <b>{10,20,30,40,50}</b>                                                                                                                                                                     |
|                                         | Linear    | R3                     | Linear Regression (LR)                                           | {true, <b>false</b> }                                                                                                                                                                       |
|                                         |           | R4                     | Ridge Regression (RR)                                            | {0.1,0.01, <b>0.001</b> ,0.0001,0.00001}                                                                                                                                                    |
|                                         |           | R5                     | Least Angle Regression (LAR)                                     | <b>{true}</b> , false}                                                                                                                                                                      |
|                                         |           | R6                     | Genetic Programming (GP)                                         | [-20,20]                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|                                         |           |                        |                                                                  | <b>{100}</b>                                                                                                                                                                                |
|                                         | Nonlinear | R7                     | Neural Network Regression (NNR)                                  | [N] The number of neurons in the hidden layers.<br>{4,8,16,32,64, <b>100</b> }                                                                                                              |
|                                         |           | R8                     | Support Vector Regression (SVR)                                  | [N] L2 penalty (regularization term) parameter.<br>{0, <b>0.0001</b> , 0.001, 0.01, 0.1}                                                                                                    |
|                                         |           |                        |                                                                  | {0.25, 0.5, <b>1</b> , 2, 4}                                                                                                                                                                |
|                                         |           | R9                     | Relevance Vector Machine (RVM)                                   | [N] Penalty parameter of the error term with Linear kernel.<br><b>{1}</b>                                                                                                                   |
|                                         |           | R10                    | Multivariate Adaptive Regression Splines (MARS)                  | [N] Penalty parameter of the error term. The maximum degree of interaction (Friedman's $m$ ). The default is 1, meaning build an additive model (i.e., no interaction terms).<br><b>{1}</b> |
|                                         | Lazy      | R11                    | K-nearest Neighbors Regression (KNR)                             | [N] The number of neighbors.<br>{1,5,9,13,17}                                                                                                                                               |
|                                         |           | R12                    | K*                                                               | N/A                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Pairwise Approach                       |           | P1                     | Ranking SVM                                                      | [N] Penalty parameter of the error term with linear kernel.<br><b>{1}</b>                                                                                                                   |
|                                         |           | P2                     | RankBoost                                                        | [N] The number of rounds to train.<br><b>{300}</b>                                                                                                                                          |
|                                         |           | P3                     | RankNet                                                          | [N] The number of epochs to train.<br><b>{100}</b>                                                                                                                                          |
|                                         |           | P4                     | LambdaRank                                                       | [N] The number of epochs to train.<br><b>{100}</b>                                                                                                                                          |
| Listwise Approach                       |           | L1                     | ListNet                                                          | [N] The number of epochs to train.<br><b>{1500}</b>                                                                                                                                         |
|                                         |           | L2                     | Coordinate Ascent                                                | [N] The number of iterations to search in each direction.<br><b>{25}</b>                                                                                                                    |
|                                         |           | L3                     | Learning-to-Rank (LTR)                                           | [C] Feasible solution space.<br>[-20,20]                                                                                                                                                    |
|                                         |           |                        |                                                                  | [N] Population size and maximal generation.<br><b>{100}</b>                                                                                                                                 |

<sup>a</sup>We implement NB, LogR, CART, RF, KNN, DTR, RFR, LR, RR, LAR, GP, NNR, SVR, RVM, MARS, KNR, Ranking SVM and LTR based on *sklearn* (<http://scikit-learn.github.io/stable>). We implement SL, RBFNet, SMO, C4.5, LMT, Ripper, Ridor, and K\* based on *Weka* (<https://www.cs.waikato.ac.nz/~ml/weka/>). We implement RankBoost, RankNet, LambdaRank, ListNet, Coordinate Ascent based on an open-source library of popular L2R algorithms *RankLib* (<https://sourceforge.net/p/lemur/wiki/RankLib/>).

<sup>b</sup>[N] denotes a numeric value; [L] denotes a logical value; [C] denotes the continuous space.

where  $\lambda$  is a small regularization parameter.

(17) Least Angle Regression (LAR) [38]: It trains the same linear model as LR, but uses the least angle regression approach to find the

optimal  $\mathbf{b}$  value by minimizing the following loss function:

$$\sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - f(\mathbf{b}, \mathbf{x}_i))^2 + \lambda |\mathbf{b}|. \quad (5)$$

(18) Genetic Programming (GP) [39]: It trains the same linear model as LR, but uses the genetic algorithm to find the optimal  $\mathbf{b}$  value by minimizing the following loss function:

$$\sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - f(\mathbf{b}, \mathbf{x}_i))^2. \quad (6)$$

(19) Neural Network Regression (NNR) [40]: It learns a non-linear function approximator using backpropagation with no activation function in the output layer.

(20) Support Vector Regression (SVR) [41]: It uses the same principles as SVM, with only a few minor differences. Because the output of SVR is a real number, it is difficult to predict the information at hand, which has infinite possibilities. In the case of regression, a margin of tolerance is set in approximation to the SVM which would have already requested from the problem.

(21) Relevance Vector Machine (RVM) [42]: It has an identical functional form to SVR, but uses Bayesian inference to obtain parsimonious solutions for regression.

(22) Multivariate Adaptive Regression Splines (MARS) [43]: It is a nonparametric regression algorithm based on the divide and conquer strategy, in which the training data is partitioned into separate piecewise linear segments.

(23) K-nearest Neighbors Regression (KNNR) [44]: It finds  $k$  training software modules that are the nearest to the new software module based on the Euclidean distance, and predicts the number of defects or defect density of the new software module based on the mean of those of these nearest neighbors.

(24) K\* [45] is similar to KNNR, except that it uses an entropy-based distance function to calculate the distance between the new module and the training modules.

## 2.2. The pairwise algorithm

The pairwise approach views EADP problem as a classification task, i.e., learning a binary classifier  $f$  that can identify which module contains more defects or has higher defect density in a given module pair [6]. As shown in Fig. 1, assuming that the pairwise approach predicts that module A contains more defects than module B (i.e.,  $f(A) > f(B)$ ), module A contains more defects than module C (i.e.,  $f(A) > f(C)$ ), and module B contains more defects than module C (i.e.,  $f(B) > f(C)$ ), then the predicted ranking becomes  $A > B > C$ .

(1) Ranking SVM [46]: It first transforms the ranking problem into classification by computing  $\mathbf{x}_1 - \mathbf{x}_2$ , where  $\mathbf{x}_1$  and  $\mathbf{x}_2$  are the feature vectors of a pair of modules (i.e.,  $\mathbf{m}_1$  and  $\mathbf{m}_2$ ), and then uses SVM to classify  $(\mathbf{x}_1 - \mathbf{x}_2)$  into 1 or -1. If the class label is 1,  $\mathbf{m}_1$  contains more defects than  $\mathbf{m}_2$ ; otherwise,  $\mathbf{m}_2$  contains more defects than  $\mathbf{m}_1$ .

(2) RankBoost [47]: It adopts AdaBoost to classify the modules pairs. The only difference between them is that the distribution is defined on modules pairs in RankBoost, while that is defined on individual modules in AdaBoost [48].

(3) RankNet [49]: The loss function of RankNet is also defined on module pairs, but the hypothesis is defined with the use of a scoring function.

(4) LambdaRank [50]: LambdaRank optimizes an upgraded version of the loss function in RankNet with less computing complexity using the gradient descent method.

## 2.3. The listwise algorithm

The listwise approach directly optimizes the performance measures to obtain a ranking model [21]. As shown in Fig. 1, assuming that the listwise approach predicts that the ranking list  $P_{A,B,C}$  has the best performance among all possible ranking lists (i.e.,  $P_{A,B,C}$ ,  $P_{A,C,B}$ ,  $P_{B,A,C}$ ,  $P_{B,C,A}$ ,  $P_{C,A,B}$ , and  $P_{C,B,A}$ ), so the predicted ranking is  $A > B > C$ .

(1) ListNet [51]: Similar to RankNet, it uses a neural network approach with the gradient descent method to minimize a loss function.

The loss function is defined by the probability distribution on all possible ranking lists.

(2) Coordinate Ascent [52]: It trains a ranking model by minimizing the Mean Average Precision (MAP) values. It does a number of restarts to guarantee avoidance of the local minimum.

(3) Learning-to-Rank (LTR).<sup>1</sup> It trains the same linear model as LR, i.e.,

$$y = f(\mathbf{b}, \mathbf{x}) = b_0 + b_1 x_1 + b_2 x_2 + \dots + b_m x_m \quad (7)$$

but uses the composite differential evolution algorithm to directly optimize the FPA (Fault Percentile Average) value to find the optimal  $\mathbf{b}$  value when considering module as effort. When considering LOC as effort, LTR directly optimizes the  $P_{opt}@LOC$  value to find the optimal  $\mathbf{b}$  value, which is actually the LRM-GA algorithm [53]. In addition, some studies [54,55] used the logistic regression model to describe the relationship between software features and the number of defects or defect density:

$$y = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-(b_0 + b_1 x_1 + b_2 x_2 + \dots + b_m x_m)}}. \quad (8)$$

Therefore, we also investigate the performance of LTR when using the logistic regression model to build EADP models. We denote LTR with linear model as LTR-linear, and denote LTR with logistic regression model as LTR-logistic.

## 2.4. Other ranking algorithms

Besides the L2R technology, we also investigate other algorithms for ranking, including ManualDown [56], ManualUp [56] and OneWay [57]. ManualDown and ManualUp are two unsupervised learning algorithms. They are based on the observation of previous studies of Koru et al. [58,59] and Menzies et al. [56]: ManualDown assumes that larger modules tend to have more defects, while ManualUp assumes that smaller modules tend to have higher defect density. Given a module  $\mathbf{m}$  and one software feature  $\mathbf{x}_i$  of the module, ManualDown ranks all predicted modules in descending order according to  $\mathbf{x}_i$ , while ManualUp ranks all predicted modules in ascending order according to  $\mathbf{x}_i$ . OneWay [57] is a supervised learning algorithm which leverages the training data to automatically choose the best software feature for ManualUp. When module is used as effort, we employ OneWay to automatically choose the best software feature for ManualDown.

## 3. Experimental methodology

### 3.1. Datasets

Many publicly-available module-level module datasets such as NASA [60], SOFTLAB [61] and Relink [62] only contain the information of class label. Since EADP ranks software modules based on defect number or density, we only choose the 49 datasets from the PROMISE [63,64], AEEEM [65], and Eclipse [66] repositories which contain the information of the number of defects. Table 2 shows details of the selected 49 datasets, where #Module represents the number of modules in the dataset, %Defect represents the percentage of defective modules in the dataset, TotalDefects represents the total number of defects in the dataset, AvgDefects represents the average number of defects in the dataset, TotalLOC represents the total number of LOC in the dataset, and AvgLOC represents the average number of LOC in the dataset.

Due to the space limitation, we do not list the software features of the experimental datasets. For a more detailed description of the software features, please refer to [63,65,66].

<sup>1</sup> The algorithm is named LTR by Yang et al. [5]. Its meaning is different with L2R.

**Table 2**  
Details of the module-level datasets.

| Corpora | Dataset               | #Module | %Defects | TotalDefects | AvgDefects | TotalLOC | AvgLOC |
|---------|-----------------------|---------|----------|--------------|------------|----------|--------|
| PROMISE | Ant 1.3               | 125     | 16%      | 33           | 1.65       | 37699    | 301.6  |
|         | Ant 1.4               | 178     | 22.5%    | 47           | 1.18       | 54195    | 304.5  |
|         | Ant 1.5               | 293     | 10.9%    | 35           | 1.09       | 87047    | 297.1  |
|         | Ant 1.6               | 351     | 26.2%    | 184          | 2.00       | 113246   | 322.6  |
|         | Ant 1.7               | 745     | 22.3%    | 338          | 2.04       | 208653   | 280.1  |
|         | Camel 1.0             | 339     | 3.8%     | 14           | 1.08       | 33721    | 99.5   |
|         | Camel 1.2             | 608     | 35.5%    | 522          | 2.42       | 66302    | 109.0  |
|         | Camel 1.4             | 872     | 16.6%    | 335          | 2.31       | 98080    | 112.5  |
|         | Camel 1.6             | 965     | 19.5%    | 500          | 2.66       | 113055   | 117.2  |
|         | Ivy 1.1               | 111     | 56.8%    | 233          | 3.7        | 27292    | 245.9  |
|         | Ivy 1.4               | 241     | 6.6%     | 18           | 1.12       | 59286    | 246    |
|         | Ivy 2.0               | 352     | 11.4%    | 56           | 1.4        | 87769    | 249.3  |
|         | Jedit 3.2             | 272     | 33.1%    | 382          | 4.24       | 128883   | 473.8  |
|         | Jedit 4.0             | 306     | 24.5%    | 226          | 3.01       | 144803   | 473.2  |
|         | Jedit 4.1             | 312     | 25.3%    | 217          | 2.75       | 153087   | 490.7  |
|         | Jedit 4.2             | 367     | 13.1%    | 106          | 2.21       | 170683   | 465.1  |
|         | Jedit 4.3             | 492     | 2.2%     | 12           | 1.09       | 202363   | 411.3  |
|         | Log4j 1.0             | 135     | 25.2%    | 61           | 1.79       | 21549    | 159.6  |
|         | Log4j 1.1             | 109     | 33.9%    | 86           | 2.32       | 19938    | 182.9  |
|         | Log4j 1.2             | 205     | 92.2%    | 498          | 2.63       | 38191    | 186.3  |
|         | Lucene 2.0            | 195     | 46.7%    | 268          | 2.95       | 50596    | 259.5  |
|         | Lucene 2.2            | 247     | 58.3%    | 414          | 2.88       | 63571    | 257.4  |
|         | Lucene 2.4            | 340     | 59.7%    | 632          | 3.11       | 15508601 | 302.5  |
|         | Poi 1.5               | 237     | 59.5%    | 342          | 2.43       | 55428    | 233.9  |
|         | Poi 2.0               | 314     | 11.8%    | 39           | 1.05       | 93171    | 296.7  |
|         | Poi 2.5               | 385     | 64.4%    | 496          | 2.0        | 119731   | 311.0  |
|         | Poi 3.0               | 442     | 63.6%    | 500          | 1.78       | 129327   | 292.6  |
|         | Synapse 1.0           | 157     | 10.2%    | 21           | 1.31       | 28806    | 183.5  |
|         | Synapse 1.1           | 222     | 27%      | 99           | 1.65       | 42302    | 190.5  |
|         | Synapse 1.2           | 256     | 33.6%    | 145          | 1.69       | 53500    | 209.0  |
|         | Velocity 1.4          | 196     | 75%      | 210          | 1.43       | 51713    | 263.8  |
|         | Velocity 1.5          | 214     | 66.4%    | 331          | 2.33       | 53141    | 248.3  |
|         | Velocity 1.6          | 229     | 34.1%    | 190          | 2.44       | 57012    | 249.0  |
|         | Xalan 2.4             | 723     | 15.2%    | 156          | 1.42       | 225088   | 311.3  |
|         | Xalan 2.5             | 803     | 48.2%    | 531          | 1.37       | 304860   | 379.7  |
|         | Xalan 2.6             | 885     | 46.4%    | 625          | 1.52       | 411737   | 465.2  |
|         | Xalan 2.7             | 909     | 98.8%    | 1213         | 1.35       | 428555   | 471.5  |
|         | Xerces init           | 162     | 47.5%    | 167          | 2.17       | 90718    | 560.0  |
|         | Xerces 1.2            | 440     | 16.1%    | 115          | 1.62       | 159254   | 361.9  |
|         | Xerces 1.3            | 453     | 15.2%    | 193          | 2.8        | 167095   | 368.9  |
|         | Xerces 1.4            | 588     | 74.3%    | 1596         | 3.65       | 141180   | 240.1  |
| AEEEM   | Eclipse JDT Core 3.4  | 997     | 20.7%    | 374          | 1.82       | 224055   | 224.7  |
|         | Eclipse PDE UI 3.4.1  | 1497    | 14.0%    | 341          | 1.63       | 146952   | 98.2   |
|         | Equinox framework 3.4 | 324     | 39.8%    | 244          | 1.89       | 39534    | 122.0  |
|         | Mylyn 3.1             | 1862    | 13.2%    | 340          | 1.39       | 156102   | 83.8   |
|         | Apache Lucene 2.4.0   | 691     | 9.26%    | 97           | 1.52       | 146952   | 212.7  |
| Eclipse | Eclipse_I.Package2.0  | 377     | 50.4%    | 917          | 4.83       | 796941   | 2114.0 |
|         | Eclipse_I.Package2.1  | 434     | 44.7%    | 662          | 3.41       | 987603   | 2275.6 |
|         | Eclipse_I.Package3.0  | 661     | 47.3%    | 1534         | 4.90       | 1305908  | 1975.7 |

### 3.2. Preparing training and testing data

We use the following two validation settings, and repeat the training and testing phases 10 times to alleviate possible bias during hyperparameter tuning.

(1) **Cross-release Validation:** We use the previous release as the training dataset, and use the current release as the testing dataset, i.e., cross-release validation. For example, we use Ant 1.3 as the training dataset and use Ant 1.4 as the testing dataset. Since the AEEEM datasets only contain the single release, we do not employ them under cross-release validation. Therefore, we obtain 32 pairs of training and testing datasets.

(2) **Cross-Project Validation:** In this setting, EADP models are tested on one project (i.e., the testing dataset), and trained on all other projects (i.e., the training datasets). Given  $n$  projects, there are  $n$  pairs of training and testing datasets. Since there are 41 releases of 11 projects in the PROMISE datasets and there are duplicated software modules in the different releases of the same project, we only choose the most recent release dataset as training dataset or testing dataset. Finally, we obtain 11 pairs of training and testing datasets for the

PROMISE datasets, and 5 pairs of training and testing datasets for the AEEEM datasets.

### 3.3. Constructing EADP models

We use all software features as independent variables to build EADP models when using module as effort.

(1) For the **classification-based pointwise L2R algorithms**, we first discretize the number of defects into “defective” and “non-defective” class labels, and further use these class labels to train the algorithms to build EADP models. Then, we use the trained EADP models to predict the possibility of new software modules being defective, and regard the possibility as the predicted number of defects of new software modules.

(2) For the **regression-based pointwise L2R algorithms, pairwise L2R algorithms, and listwise L2R algorithms**, we use the actual number of defects as the target variable to build EADP models. Then, we use the trained EADP models to rank new software modules according to the number of defects.

(3) **ManualDown** with LOC software feature in the PROMISE datasets achieves the highest  $P_{opt}@module$  value under cross-release

and cross-project settings. ManualDown with NOA (Number of Attributes) software feature in the AEEEM datasets achieves the highest  $P_{opt}@module$  value under cross-project setting. ManualDown with Modifier software feature in the Eclipse datasets achieves the highest  $P_{opt}@module$  value under cross-release setting. Therefore, we choose the software features as the underlying software features for ManualDown.

We use 19 software features (excluding LOC) of the PROMISE datasets, 18 software features (excluding LOC) of the AEEEM datasets, 206 software features (excluding TotalLOC) of the Eclipse datasets as independent variables to build EADP models when using LOC as effort, since LOC and TotalLOC make up the effort value in the dependent variable of EADP models.

(1) For the **classification-based pointwise L2R algorithms**, we use the class labels to train EADP models. Then, we use the trained models to predict the class label (i.e.,  $Label(m)$ ) and possibility of a new software module  $m$  being defective (i.e.,  $P(m)$ ). Finally, we have three definitions of the predicted defect density (i.e.,  $D(m)$ ) of the new module  $m$ . According to Mende et al. [3], the first definition is as follows:

$$D(m) = Label(m)/effort(m), \quad (9)$$

where  $effort(m)$  is LOC of the module  $m$ .

According to Yang et al. [67], the second definition is as follows:

$$D(m) = P(m)/effort(m). \quad (10)$$

According to Ni et al. [13], the third definition is as follows:

$$D(m) = \begin{cases} P(m)/effort(m), & \text{if } P(m) \geq 0.5 \\ (P(m) - 1)/effort(m), & \text{if } P(m) < 0.5. \end{cases} \quad (11)$$

Note that the defect density will be negative according to Eq. (11)(b), but we only use the predicted defect density to rank modules. Eqs. (11)(a) and (11)(b) mean that following Ni et al.'s approach [13], we first inspect all the predicted defective modules according to their defect density, then inspect the predicted non-defective modules according to their defect density.

For the 12 investigated classification-based L2R algorithms, we denote the three definitions as  $X_1$ ,  $X_2$ ,  $X_3$ , where “X” represents the L2R algorithm, “1” represents the first definition to calculate the defect density, “2” represents the second definition to calculate the defect density, and “3” represents the third definition to calculate the defect density. For example, when employing NB to build EADP models and using the first definition to calculate the defect density, we denote it as NB.1. Ni et al. [13] proposed the EASC method, which uses the naive Bayes algorithm to build EADP models and then uses the third definition to calculate the defect density. That is, EASC is NB.3.

(2) For the **regression-based pointwise L2R algorithms, pairwise L2R algorithms, and listwise L2R algorithms**, we use the actual defect density as the target variable to build EADP models, then use the trained models to rank new software modules according to the defect density. The actual defect density is the ratio between the actual number of defects and LOC or TotalLOC.

(3) **ManualUp** with CAM (Cohesion Among Methods of class) software feature in the PROMISE dataset achieves the highest  $P_{opt}@LOC$  value under cross-release and cross-project settings. ManualUp with NOMI (Number Of Methods Inherited) software feature in the AEEEM datasets achieves the highest  $P_{opt}@LOC$  value under cross-project setting. ManualUp with NORM\_CompilationUnit software feature in the Eclipse datasets achieves the highest  $P_{opt}@LOC$  value under cross-release setting. Therefore, we choose the software features as the underlying software features for ManualUp.

We use the grid search to tune hyperparameters of the L2R algorithms to maximize the  $P_{opt}@effort$  value, because  $P_{opt}@effort$  evaluates the global ranking of EADP models. The candidate parameter values of the classification-based pointwise algorithms and the corresponding regression-based pointwise algorithms are almost the same

as the setting of Tantithamthavorn et al.'s work [19], which used the grid search to study the impact of automated parameter optimization on defect prediction models.

### 3.4. Evaluation measures

We restrict our effort to 20% of total effort in our study. The number 20% has been commonly used as a cutoff value to set the effort required for the defect inspection [68,69]. Suppose we have a dataset with  $M$  modules,  $N$  bugs and  $P$  LOC. Among the  $M$  modules,  $K$  modules are defective. Given 20% effort, we inspected  $m$  modules, which contain  $n$  bugs, and  $p$  LOC. Among the  $m$  modules,  $k$  modules are defective. Besides, when we find the first defective module, we have inspected  $m'$  modules. We use the following evaluation measures in the experiments, some of which are also widely used in the fields of both software engineering [70–75] and machine learning [76–81].

**Precision@20%effort** is the proportion of the inspected actual defective modules among all the inspected modules. When the effort is LOC, Precision@20%effort is denoted as Precision@20%LOC; when the effort is module, Precision@20%effort is denoted as Precision@20%module. The denotations of the following evaluation measures are similar to that of Precision@20%effort. A lower Precision@20%effort value indicates that software testers would encounter more false alarms, which may have negative impact on developers' confidence on the EADP model [54].

$$\text{Precision@20\%effort} = k/m \quad (12)$$

**Recall@20%effort** is the proportion of the inspected actual defective modules among all the actual defective modules in the dataset. A higher Recall@20%effort value indicates that more defective modules can be detected.

$$\text{Recall@20\%effort} = k/K \quad (13)$$

**IFA@20%effort** is the number of Initial False Alarms encountered before we find the first defect. A higher IFA@20%effort value indicates that software testers need to inspect more modules to find the first defect.

$$\text{IFA@20\%effort} = m' \quad (14)$$

**PMI@20%LOC** is the Proportion of Module Inspected. A higher PMI@20%LOC value indicates that under the same number of LOC (i.e., 20% LOC) to inspect, software testers need to inspect more modules.

$$\text{PMI@20\%LOC} = m/M \quad (15)$$

**PLI@20%module** is the Proportion of LOC Inspected. A higher PLI@20%module value indicates that under the same number of modules (i.e., 20% modules) to inspect, software testers need to inspect more LOC.

$$\text{PLI@20\%module} = p/P \quad (16)$$

**PofB@20%effort** is the Proportion of the inspected Bugs among all bugs in the dataset. A higher PofB@20%effort value indicates that more bugs could be detected.

$$\text{PofB@20\%effort} = n/N \quad (17)$$

**PofB/PMI@20%LOC** is the ratio between PofB@20%LOC and PMI@20%LOC. A higher PofB/PMI@20%LOC value indicates that, under the same number of LOC (i.e., 20% LOC) to inspect, software testers can find more bugs by inspecting per 1% module.

$$\text{PofB/PMI@20\%LOC} = \text{PofB@20\%LOC}/\text{PMI@20\%LOC} \quad (18)$$

**PofB/PLI@20%module** is the ratio between PofB@20%module and PLI@20%module. A higher PofB/PLI@20%module value indicates

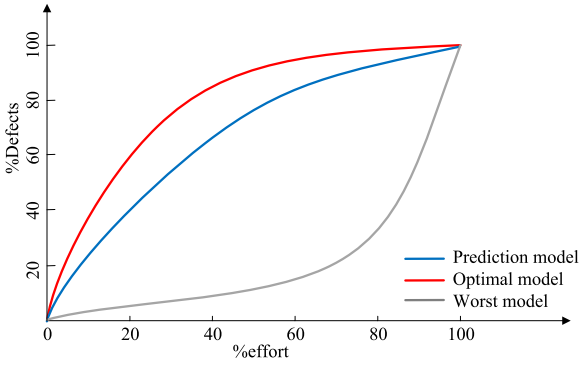


Fig. 2. A Cumulative Lift Chart.

that, under the same number of modules (i.e., 20% modules) to inspect, software testers can find more bugs by inspecting per 1% LOC.

$$P_{\text{opt}}/\text{PLI}@20\%\text{module} = \frac{\text{PofB}@20\%\text{module}}{\text{PLI}@20\%\text{module}} \quad (19)$$

$P_{\text{opt}}@effort$  is based on the cumulative lift chart shown in Fig. 2, which was proposed by Kamei et al. [4]. In the chart, the x-axis is the cumulative percentage of effort to inspect, and the y-axis is the cumulative percentage of defects found given the effort. There are three curves in the chart, corresponding to the prediction model, the optimal model and the worst model. Modules are ranked by the decreasing predicted number of defects or defect densities according to the prediction model, modules are ranked by the decreasing actual number of defects or defect densities according to the optimal model, and modules are ranked by the increasing actual number of defects or defect densities according to the worst model.  $P_{\text{opt}}@effort$  is computed as follows:

$$P_{\text{opt}}@effort = \frac{\text{Area}(\text{prediction}) - \text{Area}(\text{worst})}{\text{Area}(\text{optimal}) - \text{Area}(\text{worst})} \quad (20)$$

where  $\text{Area}()$  represents the area under the corresponding curve. A larger  $P_{\text{opt}}$  value means a smaller difference between the prediction model and the optimal model. Different from the above evaluation measures,  $P_{\text{opt}}$  evaluates the **global** ranking of the predicted modules.

When evaluating the performance of EADP models considering module as effort, researchers [5,12] usually employ FPA(Fault Percentile Average) as the evaluation measure. Yang et al. [5] proved that FPA was related to the area under the prediction curve when using module as effort. The difference between FPA and  $P_{\text{opt}}@module$  is that FPA only reports how well a prediction model is, rather than tells us how close to the optimal model a prediction model is. Therefore, we employ  $P_{\text{opt}}@module$  as the performance measure to evaluate the performance of EADP models when considering module as effort.

### 3.5. Statistical comparison test

The Scott-Knott test [82] is a multiple comparison technique that produces statistically distinct ranks at the significance level of 0.05 using hierarchical clustering algorithm. This test ranks and clusters the studied algorithms into significantly different groups, in which the algorithms in distinct groups have significant differences, while the algorithms in the same group have no significant differences [19]. Therefore, the Scott-Knott test can group the studied algorithms distinctly without any overlapping [82]. For more robust result analysis, we use the extended Scott-Knott with Cohen's  $d$  effect size awareness (Scott-Knott ESD) [17], which merges any pair of ranks that have a negligible Cohen's  $d$  effect size between them to post-processes the statistically distinct ranks produced by the traditional Scott-Knott test. Specifically, we provide the median performance measure values of the 10 cross-release or cross-project iterations of each L2R algorithm to the Scott-Knott ESD test. Then, the test generates statistically distinct ranks of the L2R algorithms.

## 4. Experimental results

### 4.1. RQ1: What is the best algorithm for EADP when using module as effort?

**Visualizations:** Figs. 3 and 4 show the distribution of  $\text{PofB}@20\%\text{module}$ ,  $\text{PLI}@20\%\text{module}$ , and  $P_{\text{opt}}@module$  values with the Scott-Knott ESD test over all datasets under the cross-release and cross-project settings, respectively. Different colors of the boxplot indicate different Scott-Knott ESD test ranks. From top down, the order is red, green, blue, yellow, purple, orange, pink and gray. Table 3 lists the top-ranked algorithms in terms of  $P_{\text{opt}}@module$  and  $\text{PofB}@20\%\text{module}$ , and the median performance values of the algorithms over all datasets under cross-release and cross-project settings.

**Results under the cross-release setting:** Fig. 3 and Table 3 reveal that (1) ManualDown and RFR have the highest ranks in terms of  $P_{\text{opt}}@module$ ; (2) LTR-linear, ManualDown, RFR, and RR have the highest ranks in terms of  $\text{PofB}@20\%\text{module}$ . Therefore, we will focus on discussing the four algorithms, i.e., ManualDown, RFR, LTR-linear and RR.

(1) ManualDown has the highest median  $P_{\text{opt}}@module$  value (0.788). When inspecting top 20% modules, ManualDown can identify median 50.2% bugs. But it requires inspecting median 66.5% LOC, which is significantly higher than the amount required by of LTR-linear, RR and RFR.

(2) RFR has the second highest median  $P_{\text{opt}}@module$  value (0.778). RFR has the highest rank in terms of  $\text{PofB}@20\%\text{module}$ , and requires significantly less LOC to be inspected compared with LTR-linear, ManualDown and RR. When inspecting top 20% modules, RFR can identify median 49.6% bugs and requires inspecting median 48.6% LOC. In addition, RFR has the highest  $\text{PofB}/\text{PLI}@20\%\text{module}$  value (1.033), which indicates that when inspecting top 20% modules, RFR can find median 1.033% bugs by inspecting per 1% LOC.

(3) LTR-linear performs significantly worse than ManualDown and RFR in terms of  $P_{\text{opt}}@module$ , but has the highest median  $\text{PofB}@20\%\text{module}$  value. When inspecting top 20% modules, LTR-linear can identify median 50.4% bugs and requires inspecting median 60.1% LOC.

(4) RR achieves the lowest median  $P_{\text{opt}}@module$  value and  $\text{PofB}@20\%\text{module}$  value among the four algorithms. When inspecting top 20% modules, RR can identify median 48.9% bugs, and requires inspecting median 50.9% LOC.

(5) The median  $\text{IFA}@20\%\text{module}$  values of the four algorithms are zero, which indicates that following the recommendations given by the four algorithms, the ranked first module is defective in most situations. In terms of  $\text{Precision}@20\%\text{module}$  and  $\text{Recall}@20\%\text{module}$ , there is not significantly difference among ManualDown, RFR, LTR-linear and RR, since all of them belong to the first rank.

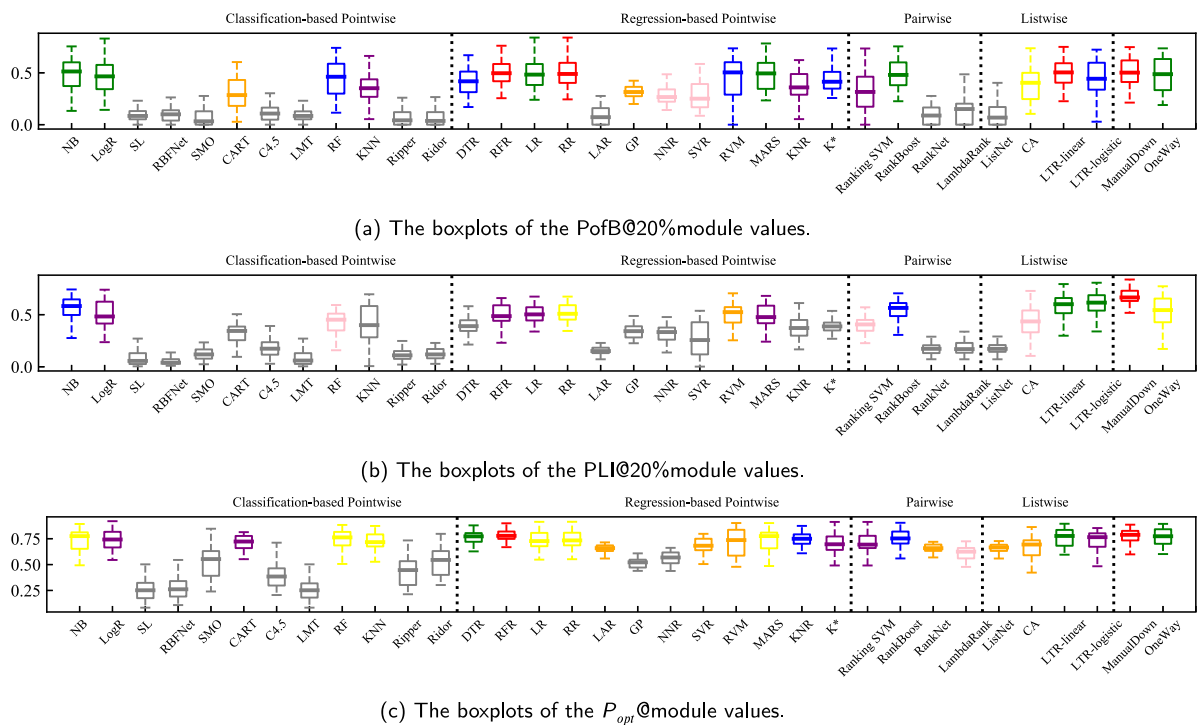
**Summary under the cross-release setting:** ManualDown and RFR perform the best in terms of  $\text{Precision}@20\%\text{module}$ ,  $\text{Recall}@20\%\text{module}$ ,  $\text{PofB}@20\%\text{module}$ , and  $P_{\text{opt}}@module$ , since they have the highest ranks in these evaluation measures. When inspecting top 20% modules, RFR requires significantly less LOC to be inspected and can identify more defects by inspecting per 1% LOC than ManualDown.

**Results under the cross-project setting:** Fig. 4 and Table 3 show that (1) ManualDown has the highest rank, OneWay has the second highest rank, and RFR, RankBoost, LTR-linear, and LTR-logistic have the third highest rank in terms of  $P_{\text{opt}}@module$ ; (2) ManualDown has the highest rank, and LR, RR, RankBoost, LTR-linear, and LTR-logistic have the second highest rank in terms of  $\text{PofB}@20\%\text{module}$ . Therefore, we will focus on discussing the seven algorithms, i.e., ManualDown, OneWay, RankBoost, LTR-logistic, RR, LR, and LTR-linear.

**Table 3**

The median performance of the top-ranked algorithms under the **cross-release** and **cross-project** settings when **module** is used as effort. (The algorithms that belong to the first rank are in bold; The algorithms that belong to the second rank are in black; The algorithms that belong to the other ranks are in gray.).

| Performance measure | Cross-release setting                                                                      | Cross-project setting                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Precision@20%module | <b>ManualDown(0.638)</b> , <b>RFR(0.619)</b> , <b>LTR-linear(0.616)</b> , <b>RR(0.605)</b> | <b>ManualDown(0.631)</b> , <b>OneWay(0.627)</b> , <b>LTR-linear(0.614)</b> , <b>LTR-logistic(0.594)</b> , <b>RR(0.589)</b> , <b>LR(0.588)</b> , <b>RankBoost(0.579)</b> |
| Recall@20%module    | <b>ManualDown(0.366)</b> , <b>RFR(0.362)</b> , <b>LTR-linear(0.345)</b> , <b>RR(0.334)</b> | LTR-linear(0.326), OneWay(0.314), LTR-logistic(0.31), <b>ManualDown(0.309)</b> , RR(0.296), LR(0.294), RankBoost(0.287)                                                 |
| IFA@20%module       | ManualDown(0), RFR(0), LTR-linear(0), RR(0)                                                | ManualDown(0), OneWay(0), RankBoost(0), LTR-logistic(0), RR(0), LR(0), LTR-linear(0)                                                                                    |
| PLI@20%module       | <b>ManualDown(0.665)</b> , LTR-linear(0.601), RR(0.509), RFR(0.486)                        | <b>ManualDown(0.655)</b> , LTR-logistic(0.647), LTR-linear(0.601), OneWay(0.592), RankBoost(0.561), RR(0.556), LR(0.553)                                                |
| PofB@20%module      | <b>LTR-linear(0.504)</b> , <b>ManualDown(0.502)</b> , <b>RFR(0.496)</b> , <b>RR(0.489)</b> | <b>ManualDown(0.492)</b> , LTR-linear(0.483), OneWay(0.479), LR(0.474), RR(0.473), LTR-logistic(0.456), RankBoost(0.452)                                                |
| PofB/PLI@20%module  | RFR(1.033), RR(0.933), LTR-linear(0.812), ManualDown(0.784)                                | LR(0.855), RR(0.848), RankBoost(0.846), OneWay(0.828), ManualDown(0.775), LTR-linear(0.759), LTR-logistic(0.728)                                                        |
| $P_{opt}$ @module   | <b>ManualDown(0.788)</b> , <b>RFR(0.778)</b> , <b>LTR-linear(0.777)</b> , <b>RR(0.734)</b> | <b>ManualDown(0.796)</b> , <b>OneWay(0.765)</b> , RankBoost(0.75), LTR-logistic(0.748), RR(0.74), LR(0.739), LTR-linear(0.735)                                          |



**Fig. 3.** The boxplots of the performance measure values for EADP under the **cross-release** setting when **module** is used as effort. (Different colors of the boxplot indicate different Scott-Knott ESD test ranks. From top down, the order is red, green, blue, yellow, purple, orange, pink and gray.).

(1) ManualDown has the highest median  $P_{opt}$ @module value (0.796), PofB@20%module value (0.492), and Precision@20%module value (0.631). When examining top 20% modules, ManualDown is able to identify median 49.2% bugs. However, it requires inspecting a median of 65.5% LOC, which is significantly higher than the amounts required by the other algorithms.

(2) There is not significant difference among LR, RR, RankBoost, LTR-linear and LTR-logistic, and OneWay in terms of PofB@20%module, as they all have the second highest rank. OneWay has the second highest rank, while LR, RR, RankBoost, LTR-linear and

LTR-logistic have the third highest rank in terms of  $P_{opt}$ @module. LR requires significantly less LOC to be inspected compared with RR, RankBoost, LTR-linear and LTR-logistic, and OneWay when examining top 20% modules. LR, RR, RankBoost, LTR-linear and LTR-logistic, and OneWay can find median 0.855%, 0.848%, 0.846%, 0.759%, and 0.728% bugs by inspecting per 1% LOC, respectively.

(3) The median IFA@20%module values of the seven algorithms are zero, which indicates that following the recommendations given by the seven algorithms, the ranked first module is defective in most situations. LR, RR, RankBoost, LTR-linear and LTR-logistic, OneWay,

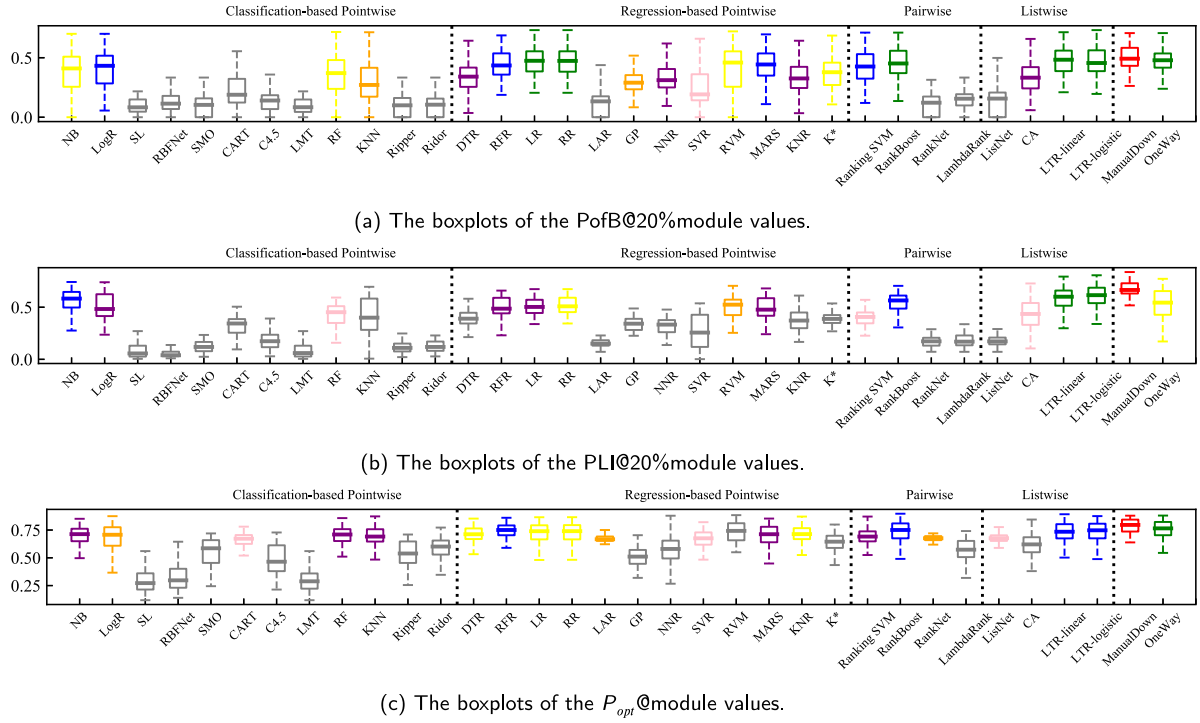


Fig. 4. The boxplots of the performance measure values for EADP under the **cross-project** setting when **module** is used as effort. (Different colors of the boxplot indicate different Scott-Knott ESD test ranks. From top down, the order is red, green, blue, yellow, purple, orange, pink and gray.).

and RFR have the highest rank in terms of Precision@20%module, and belong to the second rank in terms of Recall@20%module.

**Summary under the cross-project setting:** ManualDown performs the best in terms of Precision@20%module, Recall@20%module, PofB@20%module, and  $P_{opt}$ @module, but requires significantly more LOC to be inspected compared to the other algorithms. LR has the third highest rank in terms of  $P_{opt}$ @module, only behind ManualDown and OneWay, and has the second highest rank in terms of PofB@20%module, only behind ManualDown. When inspecting top 20% modules, LR is able to inspect more bugs by inspecting per 1% LOC than ManualDown and OneWay.

**Answer to RQ1:** ManualDown performs the best in terms of PofB@20%module and  $P_{opt}$ @module, but requires inspecting much more LOC than other algorithms. RFR performs only behind ManualDown under the cross-release setting, and LR performs only behind ManualDown and OneWay under the cross-project setting in terms of PofB@20%module and  $P_{opt}$ @module.

#### 4.2. RQ2: What is the best algorithm for EADP when using LOC as effort?

**Visualizations:** Figs. 5 and 6 present the boxplots to show the distribution of PofB@20%LOC, PMI@20%LOC, and  $P_{opt}$ @LOC values of the algorithms with the Scott-Knott ESD test results across all studied datasets under the cross-release and cross-project, respectively. In order to show the results clearly, we only list the algorithms with the best-performing defect density definition in terms of  $P_{opt}$ @LOC and PofB@20%LOC for NB, SL, RBFNet, SMO, CART, KNN, Ripper, and Ridor, since none of three defect density definitions of these algorithms gain high performance. Tables 4 lists the top-ranked algorithms in terms of  $P_{opt}$ @LOC and PofB@20%LOC, and the median performance

values of the algorithms over all datasets under the cross-release and cross-project settings, respectively.

**Results under the cross-release setting:** From Fig. 5 and Table 4, we observe that LogR\_1, LTR-linear, ManualUp, and OneWay belong to the first rank in terms of  $P_{opt}$ @%LOC, and LogR\_1, SL\_1, RBFNet\_1, ManualUp, and OneWay belong to the first rank in terms of PofB@20%LOC. Therefore, we mainly discuss the six algorithms, i.e., LogR\_1, SL\_1, RBFNet\_1, LTR-linear, ManualUp, and OneWay.

(1) LTR-linear achieves the highest median  $P_{opt}$ @%LOC value (0.695) and Precision@20%LOC value (0.394), and belongs to the second rank in terms of PofB@20%LOC. LTR-linear needs to inspect significantly less modules, and performs significantly better than LogR\_1, SL\_1, RBFNet\_1, ManualUp, and OneWay in terms of PofB/PMI @20%LOC. When inspecting top 20% LOC, LTR-linear can find median 1.034% bugs by inspecting per 1% module. In addition, LTR-linear performs significantly better than LogR\_1, SL\_1, RBFNet\_1, ManualUp, and OneWay in terms of IFA@20%LOC. The median IFA@20%LOC value of LTR-linear is 3.

(2) LogR\_1, ManualUp, and OneWay belong to the first rank in terms of  $P_{opt}$ @LOC and PofB@20%LOC. SL\_1 and RBFNet\_1 belong to the first rank in terms of PofB@20%LOC, and belong to the second rank in terms of  $P_{opt}$ @LOC. In addition, LogR\_1, SL\_1, RBFNet\_1, ManualUp, and OneWay perform the best in terms of Recall@20%LOC, since they need to inspect significantly more modules than LTR-linear. In addition, the Precision@20%LOC values of the algorithms are very low, and the IFA@20%LOC values are very high. Kochhar et al. [83] conducted a survey about the expectations of software testers on automated fault localization, and found that most practitioners thought it unacceptable if the first 10 suspicious program elements returned by a tool are all false alarms.

**Summary under the cross-release setting:** LogR\_1, ManualUp, and OneWay perform the best in terms of PofB@20%LOC and  $P_{opt}$ @LOC. However, they need to inspect significantly more modules and produce many false alarms. LTR-linear achieves the highest median  $P_{opt}$ @%LOC value, and significantly performs better than LogR\_1, ManualUp, and

OneWay in terms of Precision@20%LOC, IFA@20%LOC and PofB/PMI@20%LOC.

**Results under the cross-project setting:** From Fig. 6 and Table 4, we observe that LogR\_1, SL\_2, RBFNet\_1, SMO\_2, LMT\_2, Ripper\_1, Ridor\_2, and ManualUp belong to the first rank, C4.5\_2, RF\_1, Ranking SVM, LTR-linear, LTR-logistic, and OneWay belong to the second rank in terms of  $P_{opt}@20\%LOC$ ; Ripper\_1, ManualUp, and OneWay belong to the first rank, LogR\_1, SL\_2, RBFNet\_1, SMO\_2, C4.5\_2, LMT\_2, Ridor\_2, and LTR-logistic belong to the second rank in terms of PofB@20%LOC. Therefore, we mainly discuss the 14 algorithms, i.e., LogR\_1, SL\_2, RBFNet\_1, SMO\_2, LMT\_2, Ripper\_1, Ridor\_2, C4.5\_2, RF\_1, Ranking SVM, LTR-linear, LTR-logistic, ManualUp, and OneWay.

(1) Ripper\_1 and ManualUp belong to the first rank in terms of  $P_{opt}@20\%LOC$  and PofB@20%LOC. LogR\_1, SL\_2, RBFNet\_1, SMO\_2, LMT\_2, Ridor\_2, C4.5\_2, RF\_1, LTR-logistic and OneWay belong to the first or second rank in terms of  $P_{opt}@20\%LOC$  and PofB@20%LOC. However, the median IFA@20%LOC of the algorithms are very high. Following the recommendations given by the algorithms, software testers need to inspect more than ten modules to find the first defective modules in most situations. In addition, the Precision@20%LOC values of the algorithms are very low, which also indicates that software testers would encounter many false alarms when recommended by the algorithms.

(2) Ranking SVM belongs to the second rank in terms of  $P_{opt}@20\%LOC$ . When inspecting top 20% LOC, Ranking SVM can find median 28.5% bugs and needs to inspect median 16.1% modules. In other words, Ranking SVM can find median 1.555% bugs by inspecting per 1% module, which is significantly higher than other algorithms. The median IFA@20%LOC value of Ranking SVM is 3, which indicates that software testers need to inspect median three modules to find the first defective module in most situations. In addition, Ranking SVM belongs to the first rank in terms of Precision@20%LOC, which indicates that the false alarm rate of Ranking SVM is significantly lower than other algorithms.

(3) LTR-linear belongs to the second rank in terms of  $P_{opt}@20\%LOC$ , and belong to the fourth rank in terms of PofB@20%LOC. The median  $P_{opt}@20\%LOC$  and PofB@20%LOC values are lower than those of Ranking SVM.

**Summary under cross-project setting:** Ripper\_1 and ManualUp perform the best in terms of PofB@20%LOC and  $P_{opt}@20\%LOC$ . However, they need to inspect significantly more LOC and produce very high false alarms. Ranking SVM belongs to the second rank in terms of  $P_{opt}@20\%LOC$ , and significantly performs better than Ripper\_1 and ManualUp in terms of Precision@20%LOC, IFA@20%LOC and PofB/PMI@20%LOC.

**Answer to RQ2:** Among those algorithms with low IFA values, LTR-linear performs the best under the cross-release setting, and Ranking SVM performs the best in terms of Precision@20%LOC, PofB@20%LOC and  $P_{opt}@20\%LOC$ .

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Performance interpretation

When using module as effort, i.e., ranking modules according to the predicted number of defects, ManualDown and OneWay rank the larger modules first. Since larger modules tend to have more defects [58], ManualDown and OneWay can find more defective modules and defects under the same inspection cost, and most of the 20% modules are defective. Therefore, the Recall@20%module, PofB@20%module, and Precision@20%module values of ManualDown and OneWay are high. The modules with more defects are ranked first by a EADP model, the higher  $P_{opt}@module$  value of the model is. Therefore, the

$P_{opt}@module$  value is also high. But the larger modules contain more LOC, ManualDown and OneWay require software testers to inspect more LOC under the same inspection cost (i.e., 20% module). Therefore, the  $PLI@20\%module$  values of ManualDown and OneWay are high. As a result, ManualDown and OneWay belong to the first or second rank in terms of Precision@20%module, Recall@20%module, PofB@20%module,  $P_{opt}@module$ , and  $PLI@20\%module$  in most situations.

When using LOC as effort, i.e., ranking modules according to the predicted defect density, ManualUp and OneWay rank the smaller modules first. Most modules are small while a few are large. ManualUp and OneWay require software testers to inspect more modules (i.e., higher PMI@20%LOC) under the same inspection cost. Therefore, the Recall@20%LOC and PofB@20%LOC values of ManualUp and OneWay are high. The modules with higher defect density are ranked first by the model, the higher  $P_{opt}@20\%LOC$  value of the model is. Therefore, the  $P_{opt}@20\%LOC$  value is also high. But the smaller modules tend to be non-defective, the Precision@20%LOC values of ManualUp and OneWay are low and the IFA@20%LOC values are high. Therefore, ManualUp and OneWay belong to the first or second rank in terms of Recall@20%LOC, PofB@20%LOC,  $P_{opt}@20\%LOC$ , PMI@20%LOC, PCI@20%LOC, and IFA@20%LOC in most situations.

The performance of the three categories of L2R algorithms can be due to the difference of utility functions during training.

(1) As mentioned in Section 2, the listwise approach directly optimizes the performance measure to obtain a ranking function. We find that LTR-linear and LTR-logistic perform well in terms of  $P_{opt}@effort$ , because they directly optimize the  $P_{opt}@effort$  value. However, other listwise algorithms have poor performance. The main reason is that the goal of these algorithms is to optimize some information retrieval performance measures, such as normalized discounted cumulative gain and mean average precision, which do not take the effort into consideration [10]. Since the high  $P_{opt}@effort$  value indicates that the modules with more defects or higher defect density are ranked first, the Recall@20%effort and PofB@20%effort values of LTR-linear and LTR-logistic are also high. In addition, the performance of LTR-linear is better than that of LTR-logistic in most cases, which indicates that there is a stronger linear relationship than no-linear relationship between software features and the number of defects or defect density.

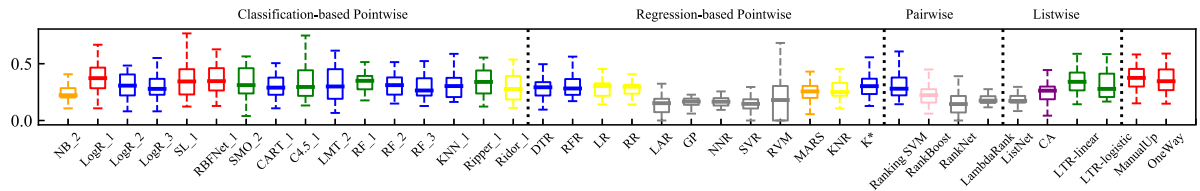
(2) When considering module as effort, the classification-based pointwise algorithms have poor performance in most situations. The main reason is that the algorithms only use the class label instead of the number of defects to build the EADP models. When considering LOC as effort, the PofB@20%LOC and  $P_{opt}@20\%LOC$  values of the classification-based pointwise algorithms with the first and second definitions of defect density (i.e., Eq. (9) and Eq. (10)) are high. The main reason is that the predicted defect density is the ratio between the predicted class label or possibility of the module being defective and the LOC of the module, which makes that the modules with less LOC are more likely ranked first. Therefore, similar to ManualUp and OneWay, the classification-based pointwise algorithms have high Recall@20%LOC, PofB@20%LOC,  $P_{opt}@20\%LOC$ , and PMI@20%LOC values in most situations. Since the classification algorithms are imperfect, for those modules that are predicted as defective, some of them may be false positives (i.e., they are actually non-defective modules), especially under the cross-project setting because there is different data distribution between cross-project data and within-project data. Therefore, the top ranked modules are likely to be non-defective according to the first and second definitions of defect density, i.e., the IFA@20%LOC values of the classification algorithms are high.

(3) Some regression-based pointwise algorithms perform well in terms of PofB@20%module and  $P_{opt}@module$ , such as RFR, RR, and LR. These algorithms outperform other regression algorithms for several reasons. RFR is an ensemble learning algorithm, which grows an ensemble of regression trees and allows them to vote on the decision to improve the performance. Since we find that there is a stronger linear

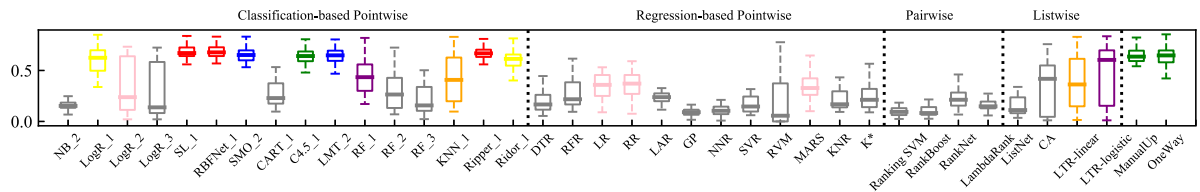
**Table 4**

The median performance of the top-ranked algorithms for EADP under the **cross-release** and **cross-project** settings when LOC is used as effort. (The algorithms that belong to the first rank are in bold; The algorithms that belong to the second rank are in black; The algorithms that belong to the other ranks are in gray.)

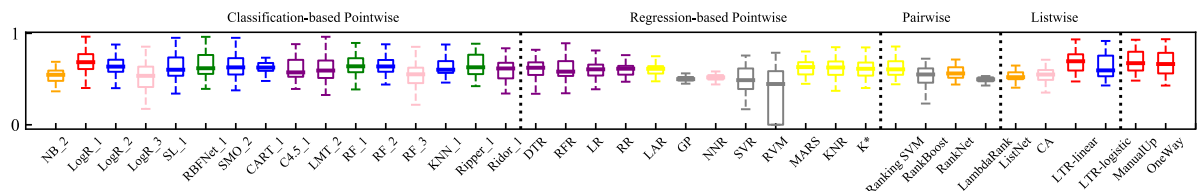
| Performance measure | Cross-release setting                                                                                                                  | Cross-project setting                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Precision@20%LOC    | LTR-linear(0.394), LogR_1(0.201), ManualUp(0.201), OneWay(0.19), RBFNet_1(0.18), SL_1 (0.176)                                          | Ranking SVM(0.53), LTR-linear(0.241), OneWay(0.219), RF_1(0.218), LTR-logistic(0.214), ManualUp(0.208), LMT_2(0.201), C4.5_2(0.2), Ridor_2(0.199), SL_2(0.198), RBFNet_1(0.197), LogR_1(0.197), Ripper_1(0.197), SMO_2(0.196)                                                                    |
| Recall@20%LOC       | <b>RBFNet_1(0.494)</b> , <b>LogR_1(0.493)</b> , <b>ManualUp(0.487)</b> , <b>SL_1(0.485)</b> , <b>OneWay(0.467)</b> , LTR-linear(0.324) | <b>Ripper_1(0.532)</b> , <b>ManualUp(0.53)</b> , <b>SMO_2(0.529)</b> , <b>SL_2(0.527)</b> , <b>SMO_2(0.527)</b> , <b>RBFNet_1(0.524)</b> , <b>OneWay(0.521)</b> , <b>Ridor_2(0.505)</b> , LogR_1(0.461), C4.5_2(0.46), LTR-logistic(0.455), RF_1(0.365), LTR-linear(0.268), Ranking SVM(0.232)   |
| IFA@20%LOC          | <b>RBFNet_1(18)</b> , <b>SL_1(17)</b> , <b>LogR_1(15)</b> , OneWay(11), ManualUp(9), LTR-linear(3)                                     | RBFNet_1(24), SL_2(19), SMO_2(19), LMT_2(19), Ripper_1(19), Ridor_2(19), C4.5_2(19), LogR_1(18), RF_1(16), <b>ManualUp(14)</b> , <b>OneWay(14)</b> , LTR-logistic(11), LTR-linear(4), Ranking SVM(3)                                                                                             |
| PMI@20%LOC          | <b>RBFNet_1(0.677)</b> , <b>SL_1(0.671)</b> , OneWay(0.648), ManualUp(0.636), LogR_1(0.625), LTR-linear(0.363)                         | <b>SMO_2(0.7)</b> , <b>Ripper_1(0.699)</b> , <b>SL_2 (0.697)</b> , <b>LMT_2(0.691)</b> , <b>RBFNet_1(0.689)</b> , <b>Ridor_2(0.686)</b> , ManualUp(0.666), OneWay(0.661), C4.5_2(0.66), LogR_1(0.649), RF_1 (0.624), LTR-logistic(0.613), LTR-linear(0.497), Ranking SVM (0.161)                 |
| PofB@20%LOC         | <b>ManualUp(0.375)</b> , <b>LogR_1(0.373)</b> , <b>RBFNet_1(0.346)</b> , <b>OneWay(0.345)</b> , <b>SL_1(0.343)</b> , LTR-linear(0.34)  | <b>ManualUp(0.42)</b> , <b>Ripper_1(0.416)</b> , <b>OneWay(0.414)</b> , RBFNet_1(0.388), LogR_1(0.387), SMO_2(0.386), SL_2(0.38), Ridor_2(0.38), LMT_2(0.38), C4.5_2(0.359), LTR-logistic (0.345), RF_1 (0.331), Ranking SVM (0.285), LTR-linear (0.283)                                         |
| PofB/PMI@20%LOC     | LTR-linear(1.034), LogR_1(0.615), ManualUp(0.601), OneWay (0.561), SL_1(0.542), RBFNet_1(0.536)                                        | <b>Ranking SVM(1.555)</b> , LTR-linear(0.672), RF_1(0.615), ManualUp(0.601), LTR-logistic(0.587), OneWay(0.587), LogR_1(0.583), SMO_2(0.568), Ripper_1(0.564), Ridor_2(0.563), C4.5_2(0.561), SL_2(0.556), RBFNet_1(0.556), LMT_2(0.552)                                                         |
| $P_{opt}$ @LOC      | <b>LTR-linear(0.695)</b> , <b>LogR_1(0.685)</b> , <b>ManualUp(0.674)</b> , <b>OneWay(0.664)</b> , RBFNet_1(0.618), SL_1(0.602)         | <b>ManualUp(0.711)</b> , <b>LogR_1(0.677)</b> , <b>Ripper_1(0.672)</b> , <b>SMO_2(0.669)</b> , <b>SL_2(0.662)</b> , <b>Ridor_2(0.66)</b> , <b>LMT_2(0.655)</b> , <b>RBFNet_1(0.653)</b> , OneWay (0.652), LTR-logistic(0.649), C4.5_2(0.649), Ranking SVM(0.616), LTR-linear(0.609), RF_1(0.603) |



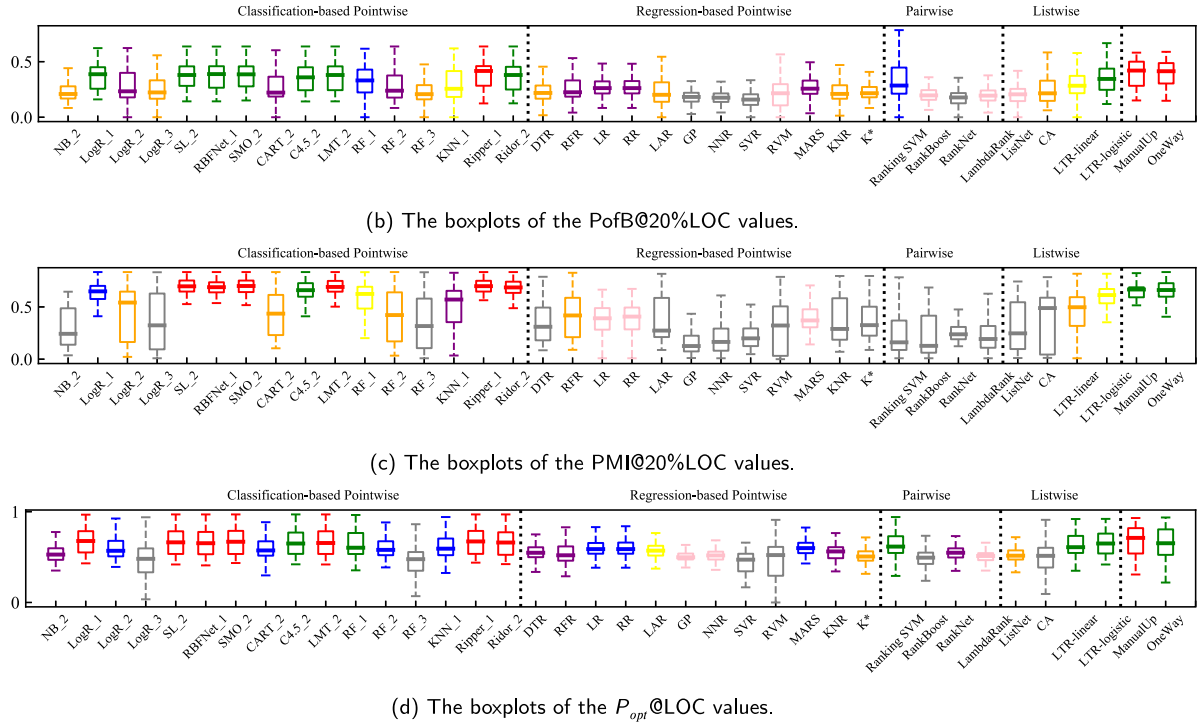
(b) The boxplots of the PofB@20%LOC values.



(c) The boxplots of the PMI@20%LOC values.

(d) The boxplots of the  $P_{opt}$ @LOC values.

**Fig. 5.** The boxplots of the performance measure values for EADP under the **cross-release** setting when LOC is used as effort. (Different colors of the boxplot indicate different Scott-Knott ESD test ranks. From top down, the order is red, green, blue, yellow, purple, orange, pink and gray.)



**Fig. 6.** The boxplots of the performance measure values for EADP under the **cross-project** setting when **LOC** is used as effort. (Different colors of the boxplot indicate different Scott-Knott ESD test ranks. From top down, the order is red, green, blue, yellow, purple, orange, pink and gray.).

relationship than no-linear relationship between software features and the number of defects, RR and LR perform better than other non-linear regression algorithms, except RFR. As for the other two linear regression algorithms, GP has poor performances, and LAR has poor performances under the cross-release and cross-project settings. The reasons can be explained as follows. GP and LR minimize the same loss function (i.e., Eq. (3)), but LR uses the least square method, while GP uses the genetic algorithm. We find that it is more difficult for GP to obtain the small value of Eq. (6), thus GP has poor performances. There is a different data distribution between the training dataset and the testing dataset under the cross-release and cross-project settings, and LAR is known to be extremely sensitive to noise [38]. Consequently, LAR has poor performances under the cross-release and cross-project settings. When considering LOC as effort, the regression-based pointwise algorithms belong to the latter ranks in terms of Recall@20%LOC, PofB@20%LOC and  $P_{opt}$ @LOC in most situations. The main reason is that the classification-based pointwise algorithms have higher Recall@20%LOC, PofB@20%LOC, and  $P_{opt}$ @LOC values than the regression algorithms.

(4) In most cases, the pairwise algorithms have poor performance. The reasons can be explained as follows. The goal of the pairwise algorithms is to minimize the number of incorrect rankings. Here, an incorrect ranking means that a module with less defects or lower defect density is ranked ahead of a module with more defects or higher defect density in a given module pair. When a model ranks the modules with more defects or higher defect density correctly, the model will obtain higher  $P_{opt}$ @effort value. Therefore, EADP models should rank the modules with more defects or higher defect density correctly, and a higher cost should be assigned to the incorrect ranking of a module with more defects or higher defect density than a module with less defects or lower defect density. However, the pairwise algorithms allocate the same costs for incorrect ranked modules with more defects or higher defect density and incorrect ranked modules with one defect or lower defect density. That is, the training utility function of these pairwise algorithms also does not take the effort into consideration. But RankBoost perform well in terms of PofB@20%module and  $P_{opt}$ @module, and

Ranking SVM performs well in terms of PofB@20%LOC and  $P_{opt}$ @LOC under the cross-project setting. The reason is that there is different data distribution between cross-project modules and within-project modules. Ranking SVM and RankBoost compute the difference of software features of two modules to generate the module pairs, then train EADP models on the module pairs. Since the distribution difference of cross-project module pairs and within-project module pairs is smaller than that of cross-project modules and within-project modules, the performances of Ranking SVM and RankBoost is higher than that of other algorithms under the cross-project setting.

## 5.2. Implications

In this subsection, we analyze implications based on our experimental results and provide a few suggestions to practitioners and researchers in this domain.

(1) When module is considered as effort, if software testers are insensitive to the number of inspected LOC, ManualDown is recommended due to the several advantages: (a) ManualDown enables testers to find most bugs when inspecting top 20% modules; (b) It does not require training data and L2R algorithms. Therefore, it can be easily applied in a new project, and it is faster to execute. (c) The intuition behind the algorithm is straightforward: larger modules tend to contain more bugs. Otherwise, RFR is recommended to build the cross-release EADP model, and LR is recommended to build the cross-project EADP model, when software testers would like to obtain more accurate global ranking of the predicted modules according to the number of defects (i.e., higher  $P_{opt}$ @module value) and find more bugs when inspecting top 20% modules (i.e., higher PofB@20%module value).

(2) When LOC is considered as effort, ManualUp, OneWay and some classification algorithms using the first and second definitions of defect density (e.g., LogR\_1, RF\_1, SMO\_2) should be avoided for EADP in practice, although the algorithms achieve the highest PofB@20%LOC, Recall@20%LOC and  $P_{opt}$ @LOC values. The reason is that many highly ranked modules given by the algorithms are false alarms under the

cross-release and cross-project settings, which negatively impacts practitioners' patience and confidence. LTR-linear is recommended to build the cross-release EADP model, and Ranking SVM is recommended to build the cross-project EADP model, when software testers would like to encounter lower false alarms, obtain more accurate global ranking of the predicted modules according to the defect density (i.e., higher  $P_{opt}@LOC$  value), and find more bugs when inspecting top 20% LOC (i.e., higher  $PofB@20\%LOC$  value).

(3) **Some previous EADP empirical studies should be revisited.** Yang et al. [67] and Ma et al. [84] proposed that slice-based cohesion features and network measures were useful when using logistic regression to build EADP models considering LOC as effort. Qu et al. [85] proposed that using  $k$ -core decomposition on class dependency networks to analyze software bug distribution can improve the performance when using logistic regression and random forest to build EADP models considering LOC as effort. However, our experimental results show that logistic regression and random forest with the first or second definitions of defect density need to inspect significantly more modules than other algorithms. In addition, many highly ranked modules produced by the algorithms are false alarms under the cross-release and cross-project settings, which make software testers unwilling to use the algorithms to build the prediction models. Therefore, these prior studies should be revisited to determine whether their findings are impacted when using better L2R algorithms to build EADP models.

### 5.3. Threats to validity

We use 49 module-level datasets from three repositories (i.e., PROMISE, AEEEM, and Eclipse), each of which provides different software features and different granularity of modules (e.g., file, package). Since the software features and granularity of modules vary, this is a point of variation between the studied datasets that may impact our results. In order to investigate the effect of different features and granularity, we separately analyze the experimental results on datasets that have the same set of software features, and find that our findings largely remain the same. Therefore, we conclude that the variation of software features and granularity of modules does not pose a threat to our study. On the other hand, the variety of software features and granularity of modules also strengthen the generalization of our results, i.e., our findings are not bound to one specific set of software features.

We investigate the performance of all L2R algorithms studied in the 24 previous EADP works, except PR, NBR, ZINBR, ZIPR, HNBR, HPR, the proposed segmented model [86], ROCPDP, (Bagging/AdaBoost/Rotation Forest/Random Subspace)+(LMT/NB/SL/SMO/C4.5), PCR, CamargoCruz09-DT, Turhan09-DT, Menzies11-RF, Watanabe08-DT, cost sensitive Ranking SVM, top-dev. The reasons are as follows.

(1) We used R packages to implement PR, NBR, ZINBR, ZIPR, HNBR, and HPR. Similar to Yang et al. [5], we also found these algorithms cannot produce a result for some datasets.

(2) The segmented model [86] used the software features that are computed on the sub-dependence graph of functions. Since our used datasets do not contain the feature information, we do not investigate the performance of the segmented model.

(3) You et al. [20] proposed the ROCPDP algorithm, which is actually the Ridge Regression (RR) algorithm.

(4) Yan et al. [9] and Yang et al. [69] investigated the performances of some ensemble learning methods (i.e., Bagging, AdaBoost, Rotation Forest and Random Subspace). Because the four ensemble learning methods can combine 11 base classification-based L2R algorithms (except RF) and 11 regression-based L2R algorithms (except RFR) investigated in our study, there are 88 ( $=4 \times 22$ ) combinations. It is impractical to investigate all the combinations. Therefore, our study focuses on investigating which base algorithm has the best performance for EADP.

(5) The difference between PCR and LR is that PCR builds a linear regression model based on the principal components, and LR builds the model based on the original software features. Since our study focuses on investigating which base algorithm has the best performance for EADP, we do not consider the impact of software features. In addition, the works on feature selection for EADP have been limited. Only Yang et al. [5] applied information gain to investigate the effectiveness of different features for EADP, and Yang et al. [12] investigated PCR for EADP. These studies found that information gain and PCA did not significantly improve the performance of EADP models. Therefore, we do not investigate the performance of PCR for EADP.

(6) Yu et al. [87] proposed a cost sensitive Ranking SVM algorithm to rank modules according to the number of defects. The algorithm employs the cost sensitive learning approach to learn from imbalanced defect data for module-level EADP. Since the algorithms studied in our work do not consider the data imbalance problem, we do not investigate the cost sensitive Ranking SVM algorithm to ensure a fair comparison.

(7) Ni et al. [13] compared EASC and the four cross-project defect prediction algorithms (i.e., CamargoCruz09-DT, Turhan09-DT, Menzies11-RF, and Watanabe08-DT), and found that EASC outperformed them for cross-project EADP. In addition, the algorithms studied in our work do not consider the different data distribution between within-project and cross-project datasets. Therefore, we do not investigate the algorithms to ensure a fair comparison.

(8) Qu et al. [88] proposed an unsupervised algorithm and a supervised equation both named top-dev, which need the information of the number of developer working on a software modules. Since our experimental datasets do not contain the information, we do not investigate top-dev.

## 6. Related work

### 6.1. Literature review

To understand the progress in EADP studies, we conducted a search of the related articles published between 2010 and December 2022.<sup>2</sup> To the best of our knowledge, the first two EADP articles were published by Mende et al. [3] and Kamei et al. [4] in 2010, and thus we set the starting year of the search to 2010. Then, we followed Zhou et al.'s approach [89] to conduct a forward snowballing search. Specifically, we first searched the articles having cited the Mende et al.'s [3] and Kamei et al.'s [4] articles through Google Scholar, then filtered out the unrelated articles. Next, we repeated this process on all the reserved articles. Finally, the search process found 24 module-level EADP articles. Table 5 provides an overview of the studies, and the last column lists the ranking criterions. "Bugs( $m$ )" represents ranking modules based on the predicted number of defects, and "Bugs( $m$ )/LOC( $m$ )" represents ranking modules based on the predicted defect density. Since classification algorithms can only predict the probability of the module being defective or the class label, we regard "P( $m$ )" as ranking modules based on the number of defects, and regard "Label( $m$ )/LOC( $m$ )", "P( $m$ )/LOC( $m$ )", "P( $m$ ) $\times$ (1-LOC( $m$ )/LOC( $m_{max}$ ))", "[P( $m$ ) $\times$ coreness( $m$ )]/LOC( $m$ )", and [P( $m$ ) $\times$ coreness( $m$ )]/LOC( $m$ ) as ranking software modules based on the defect density.

The studies can be broadly classified into two categories: those that propose novel algorithms and those that empirically evaluate the performance of different algorithms to determine the best ones. In these empirical studies, Nguyen et al. [6], Bennin et al. [7,8], Mthukumaran et al. [92], Yan et al. [9], Wang et al. [10], Miletić et al. [11], Yang et al. [12] and Ni et al. [13] investigated the performance of different L2R algorithms for module-level EADP. Nguyen et al. [6]

<sup>2</sup> The search was conducted in December 2022.

**Table 5**  
Literature overview of module-level EADP.

| Study                       | Datasets used                                                                  | L2R algorithms                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Evaluation measures                                                                                                      | Ranking criterion <sup>a</sup>                                                           |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Jiang et al. [90] 2008      | 8 NASA datasets                                                                | NB (Naïve Bayes), LogR (Logistic Regression), KNN (K-Nearest Neighbors), C4.5, Bagging                                                                                                                                                                                                               | CLC (Cumulative Lift Chart)                                                                                              | $P(m)$                                                                                   |
| Mende et al. [91] 2009      | 13 NASA datasets                                                               | NB, LogR, CART (Classification and Regression Tree), Bagging, RF (Random Forest)                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | cost effective, $P_{opt}$                                                                                                | $P(m)/LOC(m)$                                                                            |
| Mende et al. [3] 2010       | 12 NASA datasets, 3 Eclipse datasets                                           | RF                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | cost effective                                                                                                           | $P(m) \times (1-LOC(m)/LOC_{max})$ , Label $(m)/LOC(m)$                                  |
| Kamei et al. [4] 2010       | 3 Eclipse datasets                                                             | LR (Linear Regression), CART, RF                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | $P_{opt}$                                                                                                                | Label $(m)/LOC(m)$                                                                       |
| Yang et al. [67] 2014       | 6 open source datasets                                                         | LogR                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | cost effective, effort reduction                                                                                         | $P(m)/LOC(m)$                                                                            |
| Yang et al. [5] 2014        | 6 Eclipse data sets, 5 AEEEM datasets                                          | LTR (Learning-to-Rank), RFR (Random Forest Regression), NBR (Negative Binomial Regression), DTR (Decision Tree Regression), ZINBR (Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial Regression), ZIPR (Zero-Inflated Poisson Regression), HNBR (Hurdle Negative Binomial Regression), HPR (Hurdle Poisson Regression) | FPA(Fault-Percentile-Average)                                                                                            | Bugs $(m)$                                                                               |
| Nguyen et al. [6] 2014      | 5 Eclipse datasets                                                             | KNR (K-Nearest neighbor Regression), LR, MARS (Multivariate Adaptive Regression Splines), Ranking SVM, RankBoost                                                                                                                                                                                     | SRCC (Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient)                                                                             | Bugs $(m)$                                                                               |
| Mthukumar et al. [92] 2016  | 3 open source datasets                                                         | LR                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | cost effective, CLC                                                                                                      | Bugs $(m)$ , Bugs $(m)/LOC(m)$                                                           |
| Panichella et al. [53] 2016 | 20 PROMISE datasets                                                            | LR, CART, LRM-GA (Linear Regression Model with Genetic Algorithm)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | $P_{opt}$                                                                                                                | Bugs $(m)/LOC(m)$                                                                        |
| Ma et al. [84] 2016         | 11 PROMISE datasets                                                            | LogR                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | cost effective, effort reduction                                                                                         | $P(m)/LOC(m)$                                                                            |
| Yang et al. [86] 2016       | 5 open source datasets                                                         | a segmented model                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | cost effective, effort reduction                                                                                         | Label $(m)/LOC(m)$                                                                       |
| Bennin et al. [7] 2016      | 25 open source datasets                                                        | LR, LAR (Least Angle Regression), RVM (Relevance Vector Machine), KNR, K*, NNR (Neural Network Regression), SVR (Support Vector Regression), DTR (Decision Tree Regression), RFR                                                                                                                     | $P_{opt}$                                                                                                                | Label $(m)/LOC(m)$                                                                       |
| Bennin et al. [8] 2016      | 10 open source datasets                                                        | LR, LAR, RVM, KNR, K*, NNR, SVR, DTR, RFR                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | $P_{opt}$                                                                                                                | Label $(m)/LOC(m)$                                                                       |
| You et al. [20] 2016        | 5 AEEEM datasets, 34 PROMISE datasets                                          | ROCDP (Ranking-Oriented Cross-Project Defect Prediction), LR, RFR, GBR, DTR, SVR, Ranking SVM, RankBoost, GP (Genetic Programming)                                                                                                                                                                   | Spearman, Kendall, Accuracy                                                                                              | Bugs $(m)$                                                                               |
| Mthukumar et al. [92] 2016  | 3 open source datasets                                                         | LR                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | cost effective, CLC                                                                                                      | Bugs $(m)$ , Bugs $(m)/LOC(m)$                                                           |
| Yan et al. [9] 2017         | 10 PROMISE datasets                                                            | LR, SL, LogR, RBFNet, SMO, KNN, Ripper, Ridor, NB, C4.5, LMT, RF, (Bagging/AdaBoost/Rotation Forest/Random Subspace)+(LMT/NB/SL/SMO/C4.5) <sup>b</sup> , ManualUp                                                                                                                                    | cost effective, $P_{opt}$                                                                                                | Label $(m)/LOC(m)$                                                                       |
| Wang et al. [10] 2018       | 34 PROMISE datasets                                                            | RFR, RankNet, LambdaRank, ListNet, Coordinate Ascent                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | NDCG                                                                                                                     | Bugs $(m)$                                                                               |
| Miletić et al. [11] 2018    | 2 Eclipse datasets                                                             | RF, LogR, NB, C4.5, ManualUp                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | AUC (Area Under Curve), GM (Geometric Mean), $P_{opt}$                                                                   | Label $(m)/LOC(m)$                                                                       |
| Yang et al. [12] 2018       | 41 PROMISE datasets                                                            | LAR, RR (Ridge Regression), NBR, PCR (Principal Component Regression), RFR, LTR                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | CLC, FPA                                                                                                                 | Bugs $(m)$                                                                               |
| Qu et al. [85] 2019         | 18 Java Software datasets                                                      | RF, LogR                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | $P_{opt}$                                                                                                                | $[P(m) \times coreness(m)]/LOC(m)$                                                       |
| Ni et al. [13] 2020         | 12 NASA datasets, 5 AEEEM datasets, 3 RELINK datasets, and 65 PROMISE datasets | CamargoCruz09-DT, Turhan09-DT, Menzies11-RF, Watanabe08-DT, ManualUp, ManualDown, EASC (Effort-Aware Supervised Cross-project defect prediction)                                                                                                                                                     | F1-score, PF (Probability of False alarm), AUC, IFA, PMI@20%LOC (Proportion of Modules Inspected), CostEffort, $P_{opt}$ | $P(m) /LOC(m)$                                                                           |
| Yu et al. [87] 2020         | 41 PROMISE datasets                                                            | Cost-sensitive Ranking SVM, DTR, LR, RR, Ranking SVM, LTR                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Recall@20%module, PofB@20%module, FPA                                                                                    | Bugs $(m)$                                                                               |
| Qu et al. [88] 2021         | 9 open source Java datasets                                                    | top-dev, ManualUp, CBS+                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | PMI@20%LOC, $P_{opt}$                                                                                                    | Label $(m)/LOC(m)$ , $P(m)/LOC(m)$ , $P(m) \times (1-LOC(m)/LOC_{max})$                  |
| Rao et al. [93] 2021        | 41 PROMISE datasets                                                            | LTR, CBS+, EASC, LR                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | PofB@20%LOC, PMI@20%LOC, Recall@20%LOC, Precision@20%LOC, IFA, $P_{opt}$                                                 | Bugs $(m) /LOC(m)$                                                                       |
| Du et al. [94] 2022         | 18 open source Java datasets                                                   | LogR                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | $P_{opt}$                                                                                                                | $[P(m) \times coreness(m)]/LOC(m)$ , $[P(m) \times coreness(m)]/LOC(m)$ , $P(m) /LOC(m)$ |

<sup>a</sup>Bugs $(m)$  is the predicted number of defects of the module  $m$ ,  $P(m)$  is the probability of the module being defective, Label $(m)$  is the class label of the module, LOC $(m)$  is the line of codes of the module, LOC $_{max}$  is the maximum value of the lines of codes of all predicted modules, and coreness $(m)$  is the coreness of the module in the class dependency network [85].

<sup>b</sup>(Bagging/AdaBoost/Rotation Forest/Random Subspace)+(LMT/NB/SL/SMO/C4.5) represents that Yan et al. [9] investigated the performance of four ensemble learning methods (i.e., Bagging, AdaBoost, Rotation Forest and Random Subspace) using LMT, NB, SL, SMO and C4.5 as the base learners.

discovered that RankBoost had more stable prediction performance than LR, MARs, KNN, Ranking SVM. Bennin et al. [7,8] found that DTR performed the best in terms of  $P_{opt}$  when using the cross-release setup. Wang et al. [10] found that RankNet performed the best in terms of NDCG in the scenario of cross-project EADP. Miletić et al. [11] found that LogR gained the best results in the scenario of cross-release EADP. Yang et al. [12] found that RR can achieve better results than LR and NBR, slightly better results than LAR, PCR and LTR [5], and slightly worse results than RFR under cross-release setting. Yan et al. [9] found that ManualUp did not perform statistically significantly better than some classification models and LR under within-project setting, and can perform statistically significantly better than them under cross-project setting. Ni et al. [13] found that EASC can statistically significantly outperform ManualUp for cross-project EADP. Based on these experimental results observed in these studies, the ranking instability problem exists, i.e., different researchers offer inconsistent rankings of L2R algorithms as to what is best. Such inconsistent findings make it hard to provide guidance about which L2R algorithms should be used to build module-level EADP models. The main reason of the ranking instability problem in EADP are as follows:

(1) Comparing few L2R algorithms with a small number of datasets. For example, Nguyen et al. [6] investigated five algorithms on five open source software projects. Miletić et al. [11] investigated five algorithms on two Eclipse software projects.

(2) Using datasets without indicating the number of defects. Some studies (e.g., Bennin et al. [7,8], Yan et al. [9], and Ni et al. [13]) used the class label rather than the number of defects of modules to build EADP models, which may impact the prediction accuracy, because the L2R algorithms use the actual number of defects or defect density as the target variable to build EADP models.

(3) Using improper or few evaluation measures. Nguyen et al. [6] and Wang et al. [10] employed Spearman rank correlation coefficient and normalized discounted cumulative gain as the evaluation measure, which is usually used to measure the ranking quality of web search engine algorithms. Bennin et al. [7,8], Mthukumaran et al. [92], Yan et al. [9] and Miletić et al. [11] employed cost effective or  $P_{opt}$  to evaluate how many defective modules can be inspected when inspecting top 20% LOC and how accurate the global ranking of the predicted modules according to the predicted defect density is. But the number of inspected modules when inspecting top 20% LOC should also be considered as an important evaluation measure, because inspecting many modules would frequently switch between different modules, and this may increase the actual time and effort spent [54]. Yang et al. [12] employed CLC (Cumulative Lift Chart) and FPA to evaluate how accurate the global ranking of the predicted modules according to the predicted number of defect is, but the found bugs and the number of inspected LOC when inspecting top 20% modules should also be evaluated.

## 6.2. Comparison with recent studies

We discuss the difference of the conclusions between our study and the three recent studies [9,12,13].

(1) Yan et al. [9] investigated the performance of some classification algorithms, LR (Linear Regression), and ManualUp for EADP on 10 PROMISE datasets when LOC is used as effort, and found that ManualUp can perform statistically significantly better than them under cross-project setting in terms of Recall@20%LOC and  $P_{opt}$ @LOC, but ManualUp needed to inspect many modules. As shown in Table 4, when LOC is used as effort, ManualUp achieves the highest median Recall@20%LOC and  $P_{opt}$ @LOC values under cross-project setting, and ManualUp needs to inspect many modules when inspecting 20% LOC. Therefore, we can find that our finding in terms of Recall@20%LOC,  $P_{opt}$ @LOC, and PMI@20%LOC is consistent with that of Yan et al. [9]. However, Yan et al. [9] only employed Recall@20%LOC,  $P_{opt}$ @LOC, and PMI@20%LOC as the evaluation measures, and the scope of the

study limited to one type of L2R algorithm (i.e., pointwise L2R algorithm). Therefore, they did not find that ManualUp performed badly in terms of Precision@20%LOC and IFA@20%LOC, and LTR-linear performed well under cross-release setting and Ranking SVM performed well under cross-project setting.

(2) Yang et al. [12] investigated the performance of LAR, RR, NBR, PCR, RFR, LTR-linear for EADP on 41 PROMISE datasets when module is used as effort, and found that RFR performs the best in terms of CLC and FPA under cross-release setting. As shown in Table 3, only RFR and ManualDown belong to the first rank in terms of  $P_{opt}$ @module under cross-release setting. Therefore, we can find that our finding is consistent with that of Yang et al. [12]. However, Yang et al. [12] only employed CLC and FPA as the evaluation measures, and the scope of the study limited to some regression algorithms and one listwise L2R algorithm (i.e., LTR-linear). Therefore, they did not find that ManualDown can achieve higher median  $P_{opt}$ @module and PofB@20%module values than RFR, but require to inspect more LOC.

(3) Ni et al. [13] proposed the EASC algorithm for cross-project module-level EADP. The core idea of EASC is that all the predicted modules are divided into two lists: the first list sorts the predicted defective modules in descending order of the predicted defect density, and the second list sorts the predicted non-defective modules in descending order of the predicted defect density. Software testers first inspect the modules in the first list, and then inspect the modules in the second list. The predicted defective modules by naive Bayes contain very large modules, since larger modules are more likely to be defective. The very large modules require a lot of effort cost. When inspecting top 20% LOC, software testers can only inspect a small number of modules. Therefore, the PofB@20%LOC and  $P_{opt}$ @LOC values of EASC are low. In other words, EASC can reduce the false alarms, but the downside is reducing the ability to find bugs and obtaining the accurate global ranking of the predicted modules, which are measured in terms of PofB@20%LOC and  $P_{opt}$ @LOC. Because the scope of Ni et al.'s [13] study limited to some classification algorithms, they did not find that Ranking SVM outperformed EASC for cross-project EADP. Since LTR-linear under cross-release setting and Ranking SVM under cross-project setting have acceptable Precision@20%LOC and IFA@20%LOC values, **different from Ni et al.'s conclusion [13], we recommend these algorithms rather than EASC to build EADP models when LOC is used as effort.**

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper, we investigate the ranking stability of *learning to rank* (L2R) algorithms for EADP, motivated by inconsistent performance results in the literature. Compared with existing studies, we perform more comprehensive experiments by evaluating 34 algorithms, using a greater number of datasets (i.e., 49 module-level datasets), a greater number of performance measures (i.e., Precision, Recall, IFA, PMI, PLI, PofB, PofB/PMI, PofB/PLI, and  $P_{opt}$ ), and a more robust statistical method (i.e., the Scott-Knott ESD test) under cross-release and cross-project settings. This comprehensive procedure allows us to find a stable ranking on the relative performance of L2R algorithms in different situations. Experimental results show that: (1) If software testers want to find more bugs and are insensitive to the number of inspected LOC, ManualDown is more desirable for EADP; otherwise, RFR performs better for cross-release EADP model, and LR is recommended for cross-project EADP model when module is used as effort. (2) LTR-linear is recommended for cross-release EADP model, and Ranking SVM is recommended for cross-project EADP model when LOC is considered as effort.

## Declaration of competing interest

No author associated with this paper has disclosed any potential or pertinent conflicts which may be perceived to have impending conflict with this work. For full disclosure statements refer to <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infsof.2023.107165>.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

## Acknowledgment

This work was supported in part by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (61972290), the Project of Sanya Yazhou Bay Science and Technology City, China (SCKJ-JYRC-2022-17), the General Research Fund of the Research Grants, Council of Hong Kong (11208017), the Research Funds of the City University of Hong Kong (7005028, 7005217 and 6000796), and the Funding Support from other Industry Projects, China (9229109, 9229098, 9229029, 9220103, 9220097, and 9440227), the Youth Fund Project of Hainan Natural Science Foundation, China (622QN344), and the Sanya Science and Education Innovation Park of Wuhan University of Technology, China (2022KF0020).

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