

League Tables and other diseases of the Mind

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League Tables have been around for a long time. The clue is in the name "League". They are of course grounded in reality and objective measurement. When one team beats another at <Insert sport of preference>, the winning team gets more points. Over some period, usually a season, a group of teams all play each other and at the end of that season, they are ranked according to their accumulated points. Fine. Everybody can relate to that. However starting with innumerate politicians of the late 20th century and their shared mantra of "Value for money", this has become hopelessly distorted into its modern day equivalent, whereby league tables are used to rank everything, school performance, university performance, academic performance, financial rectitude, you name it. Everything has targets as anybody who works in government service will know.

This would all be fine and dandy if the criteria used to issue points made any sense. Sadly, this usually falls into the hands of people who do not understand this simple fact, Human Resources or Marketing as we call them.

Let me give you an example of this sort of nonsense which shows how academic rankings have gone down the pan. There are few subjects where one person has such a towering presence, that any straw poll whenever conducted amongst their peers will identify that very same person. One such person, Albert Einstein, occupies such a dominant role in physics that its difficult to imagine any time in the future when a straw poll would not name him. If you restricted the voters to all living Nobel Laureates in physics, you would still get the same name. There is almost nothing in the modern world which hasn't been touched by his work even though more than a century ago.

Armed with this solid gold data point, I approached Research.com's "Best scientists in the world" with confidence¹. This particular league table is based on citations and derived indices which are related to how often other scientists in journals quote them. This is how careers are made and salaries determined in academia now. This is how editors decide if you are important enough to be published in their journals, whatever you may write.

Up comes the first page. Where is he? Must be on the second page. Nope. Before getting click fatigue, a quick search reveals that he is there ... at number 786. So much for citations.

So indisputably the greatest physicist and arguably greatest scientist ever to walk the earth is completely off the radar. This tells us much about the process, so here is a take-away for you ...

¹Have a look for yourself at <https://research.com/scientists-rankings/physics>

Whenever you see a league table, think about Albert Einstein and how a towering genius can be reduced to a footnote by the stroke of a bureaucrat's pen. That's the 21st century for you, when Science died and Bullshit ruled the Earth.