

32. The meaning of life: h

By Ulrich Schollwoeck (after Kosmos 88/ Humboldt Foundation's newsletter)

There is a new dominant stag in the territory of the research indices. In future, everything that can be said about the academic performance of a researcher is to be captured in a single coefficient.

The Hirsch (German for stag) Index h , named after its inventor, physicist Jorge Hirsch of the University of California, San Diego, represents an attempt to capture the overall academic achievements or even the lifework of a researcher in a single figure. What makes this index so impressive is the simple manner in which it is calculated. With the aid of the scientific citation index, you establish how often each of the researcher's papers has been cited. If there are h papers, each of which has been cited at least h times, the researcher's publishing performance is assigned a Hirsch index of h . This index is meant to be a compromise between the quantity and quality of publications. In addition, Hirsch suggests values of h that ought to have been attained approximately by academics being appointed as assistant or full professors.

Is this just playing around in private, or is there more to it ? One shouldn't underestimate how fascinating it is to be able to compare academic achievement by a single figure. Like in sport – h has turned into a hit. Even though it was only informally suggested on the web in 2005, I have already had the first applications submitted in which h was stated – although it had in no way been required. Some academics are already pushing their (quotation) hamster index h up by a selective self-citation of publications relevant to computing the index. So far, founders and politicians not familiar with the discipline haven't discovered h as a decision-making aid. Among what I see as blind methods, such as the volume of third-party funding (academic fuel consumption, as it were ?), publication and citation indices, it could even be that h is the one-eyed king. However, it is young academics in particular, whose future depends most of all on a fair assessment of their achievements, who are utterly at the mercy of the statistical uncertainties of h owing to their small number of publications to date. At any rate, then ubiquitously – quoted Einstein would never been successful on the basis of h – neither in 1905 with just four paltry papers to his name nor later on: very decent papers, profusely quoted, indeed, but surely there could have been a few more of them. Was Einstein getting lazy lying around in his tenure hammock ?

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