



If everyone likes your research, you can be certain that you have not done anything important. That is the first thing to grasp. Conflict goes with the territory.

The young see further if they stand, metaphorically speaking, on the shoulders of older research giants, who will shake their fists upwards at the delusions of the clambering young people's subversive ideas. It is essential to annoy famous people – and it would be good if PhD students were told that on their first day. Progress means putting the old (including me) out of business.

In 1993 a handful of youngish researchers at the London School of Economics decided to run the world's first conference on a new topic. We felt that if economists could not understand human happiness and help make the world cheerier, there was not much point in the discipline, and also that the obsession with gross domestic product missed the key issues of the modern world. It is difficult to convey how strange, at that time, such an idea seemed. It lay somewhere between does-not-compute and ring-the-asylum. A 27-year-old colleague named Andrew Clark and I procured a large room. The LSE's walls were covered with posters; colleagues were petitioned to attend. Three or four brilliant speakers were chosen (one soon got a Nobel Prize, admit-

If you build a Soviet-style planning system, you will get tractors

Progress results when universities encourage iconoclasm and risk-taking, not identikit REF-able research outputs, says Andrew Oswald

tedly for different work). On the day, we dragged 120 chairs into the room. Eleven o'clock arrived. Then ten minutes past. I was chairing. I stared at the clock and we had to start, despite unforgettable embarrassment. Apart from the speakers, there were only three people in the audience.

Last month [May 2014?] there was a public debate on the same topic in LSE's Old Theatre. More than 500 people showed up; countless more were sent away. The Office of National Statistics, and many other nations' statistical offices, have begun to collect happiness survey

data. Well-being conferences proliferate.

However, the intervening decades were painful. Some hostile economists and economics journals did their best to block the new thinking, and of course many still do.

Progress occurred because it was not the year 2014. We could take risks. In 1993, none of us was bothered about research assessment exercises. My colleagues and I simply thought this seemed an interesting avenue to explore, and then we blundered along it in the usual fog of research. I did not give much thought to whether my paper at that conference would be

able to get into a journal. (In the end it finally did; the paper appeared 11 years later, in 2004, after more rejections than I care to remember.) We were all just back from working in the US and had the advantage of almost no cognisance of the RAE acronym that would later create such pressure to conform in our and others' lives.

Unfortunately, I now witness a different set of attitudes among fellow academics. Nobody is to blame individually, but I see wonderful young scholars focused on publishing per se and obsessed with satisfying the formal requirements of the research excellence framework. People routinely talk in terms of journal labels rather than discoveries; promotion committees add up starred journals ("she has three papers in four-star journals, you know"). That is a palpable sign of intellectual deterioration. Where is the discussion of ideas? If the public truly understood, there would be outcry from the taxpayer. Conservatism in scholars is

In 1993, none of us was bothered about research assessment exercises. My colleagues and I simply thought happiness seemed an interesting avenue to explore

worse than useless. University researchers who primarily wish to please people are not likely to contribute much to our world.

But if you design a Soviet-style planning system, you will get tractors. We have plenty of institutions in society whose job it is, very importantly too, to guarantee steadiness and practicality. In our universities, we instead want risk, failure, iconoclasm, more failure, genius, turbulence, yet more failure, eccentricity and relentlessly weird thinking. It may be hard, I guess, for a politician or civil servant to understand this point of view. Perhaps, to the bureaucrat, it sounds sensible to allow a few of the old, in a REF committee-like way, to vet the work of the young. It is not.

Once the young come to realise how the game works, and of course they all have to pay mortgages, they will respond strategically. The young will produce large amounts of conservative research published in the anointed journals. I am afraid I see such conservatism – more and more of it in UK disciplines, departments and universities. That makes me unhappy.

The results of the 2014 research excellence framework will be published six months from now. As we wait, this country's universities have a chance to pause, reason and think about our Sovietised system without December's coming competitive adrenalin clouding their vision. No doubt the scholarly Berlin Wall will one day come down, and we will cease to count tractors – perhaps even in my lifetime – but I think it would be literally smashing if the designers of the next REF could begin to dismantle the bricks.

Andrew Oswald is professor of economics at the University of Warwick.