

## What does the white paper mean for universities?

SNP thinks independent Scotland will mean "business as usual" for higher education, but experts are more cautious

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Monday, 02 December, 2013 | 19:28

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**Salmond can't be certain about the fate of research funding in an independent Scotland.**

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On Tuesday 26 November, the Scottish Government released its white paper on independence. High on the agenda were the removal of Trident nuclear weapons from the Clyde and Alex Salmond's childcare revolution.

The white paper also addresses a number of issues relating to universities, including research funding, tuition fees and international student visas. To find out what an independent Scotland would mean for students, The Journal spoke with an academic expert from the University of Edinburgh.

According to Professor Sheila Riddell, director of the Centre for Research in Education, Inclusion, and Diversity (CREID), there's not much new in the white paper about education: "I

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there's not much new in the white paper about education. I think some of the contents are given as a pledge, but they're clearly contingent on negotiations with the UK government and the European Union."

Riddell explained that the white paper's commitment to free tuition for Scottish undergraduate students is dependent on the priorities of future Scottish governments: "It will depend on the funding being available, and on future governments' priorities within the education budget."

She observed that at the moment funding for universities is increasing year on year, while colleges are facing cuts. But a future government might give greater priority to primary education, for example. "The white paper cannot talk about the priorities of future governments with any authority," she said.

"With the white paper, the Scottish government seems to be saying that it will be 'business as usual' for higher education in an independent Scotland."

However, Riddell pointed out that there are already some problems with the status quo. "Since student fees were introduced in England, fewer Scottish students are studying there," she observed. "Those who are typically come from socially advantaged backgrounds. Conversely, more English people are choosing to attend Scottish universities, but half of them attended private schools. There is an inequality in outcome related to socio-economic status."

The white paper indicates that the government would continue its policy of allowing universities to set their own annual tuition fees for students from the rest of the UK, and maintains that this would be compatible with EU requirements. Riddell said that European legal experts think that this might not be the case.

She explained: "At the moment, the Bologna Agreement means that students from another country within the EU are charged the same as that country's home students. Unless European regulations change, this will remain the case in an independent Scotland. Because of this, it is not clear that an independent Scotland will be able to continue charging students from the rest of the UK more than Scottish students, as the white paper proposes."

Research funding is a matter of concern to universities. Riddell said: "The overwhelming message from universities is that they want to stay within the UK research area, although more niche research programs might do better under a Scottish funding body."

The Scottish government intends to maintain a common research area with the UK by continuing to contribute funds, but according to Riddell this matter is far from settled.

She said: "David Willetts - the minister of state for universities and science - has said that this is by no means guaranteed. Furthermore, an independent Scotland is likely to face issues with UK charities funding Scottish research."

Willetts has warned that universities in an independent Scotland could lose out on the £307 million of research funding they receive annually as a part of the UK.

Riddell pointed out that although Scottish people only make up 8.4 per cent of the UK population, Scotland received 10.7 per cent of UK research council funding in 2012-13. She said: "The UK government might not agree to subsidise a different country's research to this extent."

The white paper also floats the idea of establishing a Scottish Research Council. Riddell thinks this would be sensible for an independent Scotland, in order to reflect the country's diverging social and economic priorities, while pointing out that this would mean less money to contribute to UK research area funds.

The other contents of the white paper relating to Scottish universities regard international students. In April 2012, the UK government abolished the post-study work visa. According to the white paper, this two-year visa would be reinstated in an independent Scotland, to reflect the country's "differing demographic and migration needs."

Riddell said: "International students greatly enrich the culture and economy of Scotland, so adding incentive for these students through the reintroduction of the two-year post-study work visa would be a positive thing for Scottish society."