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## Citizenship - Is independence debate too hot to handle in class?

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### Teachers could fear accusations of political bias, academic says

Teachers may shy away from covering the referendum on Scottish independence in class because they are wary of appearing politically biased, a leading academic has warned.

Aside from resources linked to the two political campaigns, teachers have been given limited information to use in lessons, said Sheila Riddell, director of the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity.

This could lead them to fear that they would be accused of trying to influence their students one way or the other, Professor Riddell said, adding: "The worry then is that they might not do anything. I think it would be much better if they had reliable information to go on that was neutral."

Teachers last year criticised the City of Edinburgh Council for writing a "superfluous" letter to school leaders, which reminded them that staff should facilitate "fair and balanced discussions allowing for different views to be expressed" and "avoid sharing their own political views".

The referendum, which is set for 18 September, is the first national vote in which people aged 16 and 17 will get a say.

"With young people having the vote for the first time, there is a responsibility there to give them some information to go on," Professor Riddell said. "I think it is very hard for teachers. The ones we spoke to have said that they are very keen to access resources which ... do not emanate from the Better Together or YES campaigns."

Jayne Ashley, treasurer of the Modern Studies Association and a teacher in the subject, agreed that there was very little material available but said teachers were pulling together their own information.

She added that her colleagues were used to teaching difficult and sensitive political issues and the referendum was no different. "Modern studies teachers are very clever people," she said. "We have been teaching all sorts of topics for years and years, and have been able to do that objectively."

Professor Riddell's team at Edinburgh has now published a set of resources on the future of higher education, which they hope will help teachers to address a topic of interest to young voters.

"We think it is really important to inform young people about the issues that really affect them, and higher education is high up on that agenda," Professor Riddell said.

The resources include a short film, entitled Our Future: Young People's Views on Higher Education in Scotland, and accompanying teaching materials on topics such as the funding of higher education, the cross-border flow of students, widening access and the referendum more generally.

The researchers are also planning a conference entitled The Future of Scottish Higher Education: Issues for Young People, to be held on 11 June at the University of Edinburgh, to which all schools will be invited.

General secretary of the EIS teaching union Larry Flanagan welcomed the new resources. "It is important that we help our young people to engage in debate ahead of the referendum, and it is helpful that a range of information is being published from a variety of sources to support learning and teaching on the relevant issues in our schools," he said.

A survey published last year showed that although two-thirds of 14- to 17-year-olds said they were likely to vote in the referendum, the same number said they would like more information before they made their final decision.

Find the new University of Edinburgh resources at [bit.ly/ReferendumResources](http://bit.ly/ReferendumResources).

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