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Do Scottish universities want a 'Yes' or a 'No' in the referendum on independence?

With opinion deeply divided, academics in Scotland are stifling their passions over independence in order to keep friendships alive after the referendum



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The Guardian, Tuesday 25 March 2014



Glasgow University: many of the reservations about independence are based on fears over research funding
Photograph: Alamy

Perhaps it's the calm before the storm but there is little evidence of controversy raging over Scotland's forthcoming referendum on independence at Glasgow University. No posters, no leaflets; few, if any, of the chatting groups of students around the venerable stone campus seem to be discussing the consequences of the September vote.

Even Patrick Harkness, a leading light of the Academics Together group campaigning against independence, is cautious about displaying his sentiments. Harkness, a lecturer in space systems engineering, who grew up in a Northern Ireland riven by the Troubles,

says: "I feel very strongly about this, but it is not something I want to shove in your face. I have personal experience of how divisive a border can be and the divisiveness of nationalism is one of the things that concerns me."

Harkness came to Glasgow from Belfast as a postdoc student and now has research funding for his project of building solar sails for spaceships, which can be propelled by the energy in light that strikes them. "My wife is English," he says. "We want to buy our forever house here and stay, but we've had our lives on hold for two years. If Scotland were to become independent, there would be a lot of pressure on us to move south."

Harkness is concerned a vote for independence would add complexity to securing research funding for his kind of work. "A funding base of 60 million people can afford things that 5 million can't, no matter how much you tax them. At the moment I work in collaboration with colleagues at English universities and it is very simple: one funding application to one funding body.

"I found the Scottish government white paper slightly chilling," he adds. "It talked about funding research into Scottish priorities. I don't think you should be looking at funding science on a nationalist basis."

Harkness sees little positive in the prospect of independence. "The UK is a leader in supporting science infrastructure and helping people in other countries who need it. I would hate to see the countries of the UK become in need of the sort of help they used to give."

Donna Heddle, professor of Nordic studies based in Orkney, part of the University of the Highlands and Islands, believes independence would strengthen the international profile of Scotland's universities. "We are not talking about ethnic nationalism here," she says. "We are talking about civic nationalism, which is very different. It's about allowing us to govern ourselves."

Her own institution is and would always be looking to the outside, she says. "We already utilise technologies that allow us to reach beyond the boundaries of our own country. We have research projects all over the world; we have students all over the world; we share PhDs with other universities, such as the University of Western Australia.

"Independence would strengthen what we see as the role of education in creating a more socially just society."

Both sides of the debate agree that the Scottish university sector is in excellent health. The "Yes" campaigners point out that the academic community in Scotland was worried about devolution; more recently there were fears of a brain drain that would might be created by the introduction of fees in England. The fears were unfounded. For its population size, Scotland has more top-200 universities than anywhere else in the world

and secures a disproportionate share of UK research funding: 13%. There is a strong demand for places from other UK students, at least for the ancient universities, and they bring in fees worth £150m a year. There is also a strong demand from overseas students outside the EU, who brought in £330m in fees in 2012, and some Scottish universities have opened satellite campuses abroad.

"We have been very clever and we have worked very hard," says Susan Shaw, a Bristol-born social scientist who has been in Glasgow since 1959. She is concerned that independence could be damaging to research funding. "Education policy is devolved but research basically is not. It is still done on a UK basis. That is working well." Scottish universities currently compete on merit with other UK universities for research funding. Shaw is concerned that should Scotland opt for independence, this may not continue. "The SNP policy is based on the assumption that the rest of the UK would agree, and they may not."

But whatever happens, she is hoping that after 19 September, academics will set about building bridges with each other. Her friend Professor Murray Pittock, for instance, is a staunch supporter of independence. "We don't agree on this but he is a great scholar and I would be very sorry to lose his friendship," she says.

Pittock, the Bradley professor of literature, is equally complimentary about his colleague. Shaw may not be right but she is "exceptionally well-informed," he says. On this subject, it's friend against friend throughout academia.

Although a supporter of a "yes" vote, Pittock, author of a recent Radio 4 series on the origins of Scottish independence, disagrees with the SNP's stated policy of continuing to charge fees for students from the rest of the UK after independence. "The Scottish government has obtained some legal advice based on the case that could be made that EU and rest-of-UK students may arrive in such numbers that it would be a threat to the local economy," he says. "It is hard to see that it would apply in most subjects."

Pittock also argues that "the unfriendliness to overseas students" of recent UK government policy threatens Scottish universities, which rely on this fee income and are popular choices for overseas students.

In 2012 the government called a halt to special visa arrangements that allowed overseas students to work for two years after graduating from Scottish universities without applying for a work permit. Would-be students are also increasingly reporting difficulties in getting student visas to study in Scotland and the numbers coming are falling, says Pittock. "Students in India are becoming very dissatisfied by UK government policy in this area and the behaviour of the Border Agency."

In his view, another risk of a "No" vote is the prospect of future austerity measures. A Conservative government in London after 2015 is likely to reduce funding for higher

education, he says, which could threaten the Scottish government's current provision of free higher education for Scottish students. Under independence, Scotland would collect its own taxes and be completely responsible for its own funding arrangements. "Post 2015, austerity measures will really bite," says Pittock. "That will be a real threat to the policy of education free at the point of use."

He is also concerned about the prospect of a referendum on European Union membership. EU research funding is a significant contributor to the Scottish sector.

For Pittock, independence is full of possibilities. "Scotland has a very strong university sector and under independence we would be free to promote that globally and to participate more freely internationally."

Whatever the outcome of the vote, academic argument on this 300-year-old topic is likely to continue, far beyond the referendum.

Fees and funding: who wants what in higher education

	'Yes' campaign	'No' campaign	Notes
Fees	The current SNP position is that students from the rest of the UK would continue to be charged to study at Scottish universities. It would continue to be free for Scots	The Better Together campaign argues that this would be illegal under EU law and that if other UK students were entitled to study free in Scotland, universities would lose £150m a year	Some in the 'Yes' camp accept this. They say there would be intense competition for the capped number of funded places, but there could be a big increase in overseas students at Scottish universities
Overseas fees	The 'Yes' camp says the Westminster government is making it increasingly difficult for Scottish universities to recruit overseas students. Under independence this could be fixed	Some in the 'No' camp suggest that if Scotland were not in the EU, Scots would have to pay the higher overseas fees to study in England and vice versa	Most on both sides accept that it is unlikely Scotland would be out of the EU and the European economic area. Some 'No' campaigners also argue that visa problems could be fixed with devolution
Austerity	The 'Yes' campaign argues that austerity measures and the reduction of HE funding by Westminster may have knock-on effects to Scottish funding after 2015 and threaten free university education	The 'No' campaign says Scotland has control of its own budget and can decide its own priorities under devolution	Some in the Better Together campaign are arguing for a commission on devolution to look at giving Scotland more control over its own finances after a 'No' vote
Research funding	The SNP position is that research funding should be carried on collaboratively with Scotland paying into the UK bodies that dole out funds on merit	This is a key area of concern for academics. The current funding structure is UK-wide and Scottish universities get 13% of funding against an 8% population share	'Yes' campaigners suggest that if a future Tory government took the UK out of the EU, universities could risk losing access to EU research funds. 'No' campaigners say this is

			highly unlikely
Academic careers	The SNP says that Scotland will be in the EU and the UK travel zone and there will be no effect on the movement of staff	The 'No' camp fears that complications over pensions, peer assessment structures and funding will make it harder to cross the border and for Scottish universities to attract good staff	'Yes' campaigners recall that universities were very strongly anti in the devolution debates of the 70s but the predicted brain-drain never happened

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