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## AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

### What might independence mean for Scotland's universities?

12 June 2014 | By [David Matthews \(URL=/david-matthews/1112.bio\)](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/author/david-matthews/)

Whatever the result of the referendum, the impact on Scottish higher education will be considerable. David Matthews talks to advocates for both sides



Source: *Paul Bateman*

The government in an independent Scotland would be highly supportive of universities but would also want 'clearer state control' to pursue economic objectives

This September, Scottish voters could make a historic decision to leave the UK. But what would that mean for higher education north of the border?

For four Scottish universities – St Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh – life in an independent Scotland would represent a return to their historical roots, as all were founded well before the union with England. The oldest, the University of St Andrews (founded around 1413), had already stood for almost 300 years before the 1707 Acts of Union: almost as much time as has elapsed since.

But times are obviously very different now, and although the immediate questions for higher education that would arise from a “yes” vote on 18 September have received plenty of attention (see ‘Burning issues: tuition fees and research council funds’ box below), how the Scottish academy would look 10 or 20 years down the line – the blink of an eye for some institutions – has been less discussed.

There is excitement among some scholars north of the border about what universities could achieve in an independent Scotland. Yet fear stalks the debate as well, with advocates for both sides worried that they could be academically blacklisted for speaking out, and some pro-union scholars recounting tales of vicious online attacks for coming out against independence.

One man not afraid to speak out in favour of independence is Willy Maley, professor of Renaissance studies at the University of Glasgow. For him, secession from the UK would offer a chance for Scottish universities to break free of the “corporate ethos” that he believes has wormed its way into higher education.

A “target-driven, management-controlled model has been imposed across the UK”, he says. But independence could bring about a “much more devolved university system where academics have more power”.

In 2012, a committee commissioned by the Scottish government and chaired by Ferdinand von Prondzynski, principal of Aberdeen’s Robert Gordon University, set out a series of [radical proposals to change Scottish university governance](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0038/00386780.pdf) (URL=<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0038/00386780.pdf>). These included the election of governing body chairs by students and staff; the presence on boards of at least two representatives elected by staff; a requirement for governing bodies, over time, to become at least 40 per cent female; and the freezing of principals’ pay until remuneration processes have been reviewed.

Maley (who, like everyone *Times Higher Education* spoke to for this article, stresses that he is speaking in a personal capacity) points to these proposals as an indication of the “new ethos” that might prevail in the academy of an independent Scotland. The Scottish education secretary, Michael Russell, tells *THE* that he is “still committed” to implementing the report in its “full form”, although he acknowledges that he could do so under Scotland’s existing devolved powers (see ‘Responsibility: the current system’ box below).

Russell also believes that Scotland’s new, post-independence constitution should enshrine the Scottish National Party’s policy of free higher education for all students domiciled in Scotland on the grounds that “education is a social and an individual good” that is “central to our view of ourselves [as] a thinking nation”.

Von Prondzynski also hopes that a “yes” vote might spur a cultural shift in Scottish universities, allowing them to diverge further from their English cousins and “become places where intellectual objectives should be foremost”.

“In some ways, England has been a distorting influence on that [objective] of late,” he says, pointing to the decision of many English universities to charge the maximum £9,000 annual tuition fee. Of course, many Scottish universities also opted to charge that maximum to UK students domiciled outside Scotland – in order, von Prondzynski says, to make a “quality statement” to prospective students. He regards this, however, as a “bizarre” symptom of the current culture in universities that an independent Scotland could move away from. “Nobody should be thinking in those terms,” he argues.

But would independence really herald, as Maley puts it, a “process of democratisation from the ground up” in Scottish universities, and a rolling back of the power of managers?

Murray Pittock, Bradley professor of English literature at the University of Glasgow, is one of the leaders of the pro-independence group Academics for Yes, but he is sceptical. The government in an independent Scotland would be highly supportive of universities but would also want “clearer state control” to pursue economic objectives, rather than adopting England’s market-based approach, he says.

“The more that governance is academic-led, the more it tends to look towards internal stakeholders [rather] than external stakeholders,” he points out, meaning that the government – a “loving but invasive” external stakeholder – would be reluctant to hand over power to scholars.

Meanwhile, Richard J. Williams, professor of contemporary visual cultures at the University of Edinburgh, dismisses Maley’s hope that independence would bring in more power for academics as a “complete fantasy”.

He says the fact that his institution has “done extremely well over the past few years” is largely down to a governance reform process that abolished faculties and departments and created much larger colleges and schools that, in his view, put more power in the hands of senior managers. Universities have become so complex and have so much money flowing through them that there is “no way academics are in a position to manage these things”, he adds.

Williams also worries about “the extent to which the Scottish government wants to make things distinctively culturally Scottish over the next 10 to 20 years”. He says that what he understands to be a “serious proposal” was recently submitted by several Scottish universities to a particular research council asking it to fund a two-week training course for all funded PhD students in Scotland on “the values of the Scottish Enlightenment”. Although the proposal didn’t go ahead in the end, Williams found the episode “very troubling”.

He is also sceptical of what he sees as the “inexorable” rise of the use of Gaelic in Scottish universities. Four institutions have drawn up plans to preserve the language, with the University of Aberdeen using bilingual signs on campus and translating parts of its website. But Williams thinks this promotion of the language, which is spoken by just over 1 per cent of the Scottish population [according to the 2011 census \(URL=http://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/news/census-2011-release-2a\)](http://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/news/census-2011-release-2a), is “a way of making a symbolic and public difference [between Scotland and] the rest of the UK” and “has nothing to do with a living language at all”.

But Russell, the education secretary, dismisses such fears of a cultural agenda for Scotland’s universities as “a very silly perspective”, describing the use of Gaelic in Scotland as “a voluntary activity”.

Many “yes” supporters hope that an independent Scotland would become a higher-spending state and pour more money into universities.

Bryan MacGregor, head of the College of Physical Sciences at Aberdeen, argues that the new country “wouldn’t have to devote resources to HS2 [the high-speed rail line to be built in England] or nuclear weapons”, and would give education “a higher priority” because of the “general cultural support” that it commands in Scotland, as evidenced by the decision not to charge tuition fees.



Source: Paul Bateman

Many academics are reluctant to come down on one side or the other of the debate. [They] are ‘worried there will be sanctions against them’ if they come out against independence

Support for that view is lent by First Minister Alex Salmond’s emotive preface to the government’s White Paper setting out the case for independence. In the first paragraph alone, he mentions Scotland’s “unrivalled commitment to the empowerment of education” as well as the “brilliance of our scholars” and Scots’ “passion and curiosity for invention”. Under his leadership, funding for higher education in Scotland has risen in cash terms by about 15 per cent since 2011-12 – although this has come at the expense of funding for further education. In contrast, direct public support for teaching in English universities has fallen dramatically, replaced by higher tuition fees.

Russell wants to “continue” high levels of state support for higher education. He believes that England’s “withdrawal” from funding it was a “foolish decision, not least because it hasn’t worked” in terms of saving the government money.

But whether universities would be better funded in an independent Scotland also turns on the much bigger question of whether increased spending would be affordable. The [Institute for Fiscal Studies has suggested \(URL=http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/6950\)](http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/6950) that the new country would need to raise taxes or cut spending beyond the current UK austerity plans to make its public finances “sustainable”. The [Scottish government’s White Paper on independence \(URL=http://82.113.138.107/00439021.pdf\)](http://82.113.138.107/00439021.pdf) says, however, that leaving the UK would allow Scotland to engage in “responsible borrowing to fund growth”.

As for research funding, something of a stalemate has been reached over whether Scottish universities would be able to remain part of the UK research council system after independence (see 'Burning issues: tuition fees and research council funds' box below). But supporters of independence are clear that, in the longer term, the government would take tighter control of Scotland's research agenda.

"In a smaller system such as Scotland, you might find that research funding is much more focused on practical economic outputs," von Prondzynski says. Asked if this might compromise academic freedom, he responds that "academic freedom doesn't imply that the government make significant funding available with no conditions attached".

The Scottish government's own document on post-independence research is vague, noting that a "full range of fiscal levers" would be available to it to "encourage greater collaboration between universities and the private sector", yet stressing its respect for "responsible autonomy" in research.

If some areas of research were privileged in the name of economic growth (the White Paper mentions oil and gas, food and drink, life sciences and tourism as being particular Scottish strengths), others would be neglected, fears Susan Shaw, former vice-principal of the University of Strathclyde and a member of the pro-union Academics Together group. Scotland's research trajectory would be similar to that of the Republic of Ireland, which, she says, is "not able to have large numbers of research areas and [has] no blue-skies research".

She also warns that not having access to common UK institutions such as the Met Office, the British Antarctic Survey and the British Geological Survey would have a negative impact on Scottish research.

Meanwhile, Jo Shaw, Salvesen chair of European institutions at the University of Edinburgh, says that although universities would adapt whatever the referendum result, in smaller states, relationships between universities and research funders can become a "bit cosy", leading to a "sort of corporatist approach". She fears that researchers could end up asking themselves: "What would the Scottish Funding Council want me to do?"

Questions about European Union research funds make things even more complicated. With the United Kingdom Independence Party putting in a strong display at the recent European elections (garnering 27 per cent of the vote and gaining an additional 11 MEPs) and the Conservatives promising a referendum on the UK's EU membership in 2017, the SNP is now touting independence as the only way to ensure Scotland can continue to access EU research funding, which it says has yielded the country more than €500 million (£407 million) since 2007.

Conversely, independence could also put EU research funds at risk. In February, the president of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, said that it would be "extremely difficult, if not impossible" for an independent Scotland to join the EU.

Academics and universities have been busy trying to work through this tangled thicket of post-independence scenarios for higher education. One such project, "Higher Education in Scotland, the Devolution Settlement and the Referendum on Independence", based at the University of Edinburgh, is due to report its findings in late June, and the University of Glasgow has held numerous events in the build-up to the referendum, one of which provided the platform for former UK prime minister Gordon Brown to set out his case for the union.

But many academics are reluctant to come down on one side or the other of the debate. One scholar, who does not want to be identified, says that academics are "worried there will be sanctions against them" if they come out against independence. She adds that a senior colleague who agrees "150 per cent" with the pro-union cause refuses to sign up publicly because he fears that he will be blocked from academic positions if Scotland votes for independence.

The prevalence of such fears was precisely what drew her into the "no" campaign, because she was "concerned that the voice of academics for 'no' was not being heard". But after coming out publicly against independence, she received online abuse, including one email that told her to "go back to England, you fucking whore". This is because "elements" within the nationalist campaign regard pro-unionists as "unpatriotic". Although she was born in England, she considered Scotland to be her "home". But the abuse has led her to question that Scottish identity and made her feel "uncomfortable, unwanted and worried".

Another academic, who also does not want to be named, suffered abuse online from the pro-independence "cybernats" to the effect that, as a perceived Englishman living in Scotland, he was "not welcome".

Although he has written about the referendum, the fear of being "jumped on" by "visceral, really nasty" online abuse has put him off coming out publicly for the "no" side.

But a pro-independence scholar, who also prefers to remain anonymous, points out that the online abuse is dealt in both directions. He cites a newspaper survey conducted in March that found that "yes" supporters were more than twice as likely as "no" supporters to have been subjected to "threats or abuse" online or in person. He also dismisses the idea that pro-union academics would be blackballed in an independent Scotland. Rather, he says, supporting independence has "not really done my career any good because the establishment and those who run universities are 'no' [supporters]". For this reason, he "thought long and hard about coming out".



Asked whether the independence debate among academics has been open, Russell says that it has been “raging” across campuses and notes that academics from both sides have been happy to put their names to [letters in Scottish newspapers](http://www.heraldscotland.com/comment/letters/independence-would-cause-harm-to-research-base-in-this-country.24125267) (URL=<http://www.heraldscotland.com/comment/letters/independence-would-cause-harm-to-research-base-in-this-country.24125267>) debating the impact of independence on Scotland’s research base.

As institutions, however, Scottish universities have remained scrupulously neutral. Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen, for instance, hurriedly quit the CBI in April after the business body registered with the Electoral Commission as a pro-union backer.

Vice-chancellors have also stayed quiet and are largely unwilling, even off the record, to indicate how they will vote. The exception is von Prondzynski, but his “yes” will be motivated more by the fact that Scotland’s “ethos and culture...has diverged from that of England” than by any higher education concerns.

As Maley’s remarks illustrate, supporters of Scottish independence have some of the same concerns about being part of the UK as many academics do about the direction of their universities: the march of marketisation, a retreat from the ideals of free education and social democracy, and the sense that they are governed by a distant elite.

The question that the Scottish academy must grapple with is whether independence might bring about a viable new direction – or be just an exercise in nostalgic fantasy.



Source: Paul Bateman

### **Burning issues: tuition fees and research council funds**

The debate around higher education and independence has focused on the two immediate issues that would be up for negotiation if Scotland voted to leave the UK: tuition fees and access to the UK research councils’ funds.

Currently, Scottish-domiciled students and European Union students from outside the UK are exempt from undergraduate tuition fees in Scotland, while those from England, Wales and Northern Ireland have to pay up to £9,000 a year. This is allowed under EU rules because member states are permitted to discriminate within their borders, and the Scottish National Party wants to continue this arrangement after independence.

But if Scotland became a separate member of the EU, legal scholars have suggested that it would have to exempt English, Welsh and Northern Irish undergraduates from fees as well, potentially sparking a flood of applications from them to Scottish universities. The SNP believes that this danger would enable it to convince the EU to preserve the current arrangements.

Meanwhile, Scottish universities currently win a disproportionately high share of research council funding, so continuing the current system after independence could be seen as a subsidy from the remainder of the UK to Scotland.

But [the SNP argues that an independent Scotland](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/scottish-ministers-do-the-highland-mud-sling-over-uk-split/2011082.article) (URL=<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/scottish-ministers-do-the-highland-mud-sling-over-uk-split/2011082.article>) and the rest of the UK would have a common interest in preserving that system because of Scottish leadership in certain disciplines.

## International makeover: overseas students and the Scottish 'brand'

One of the carrots the Scottish National Party is dangling in front of Scottish universities in the event of independence is an end to the "xenophobic" UK immigration regime and the reintroduction of post-study work visas.

The removal of such visas by the UK government in 2012, combined with harsh rhetoric on immigration, has been blamed for the first recorded fall in the number of non-EU international students in the UK in 2012-13.

International students may be especially important for Scottish universities over the next couple of decades. A Universities UK report, [The Future Size and Shape of the Higher Education Sector in the UK: Demographic Projections](http://www.ukep.org/assets/files/gcfc-files/UKDEMOG.pdf) (URL=<http://www.ukep.org/assets/files/gcfc-files/UKDEMOG.pdf>), has predicted that the number of Scottish 18- to 20-year-olds will shrink by 11 per cent between 2006 and 2027, compared with a 2.4 per cent rise in England. But if Scotland gains control of its own immigration system, Michael Russell, the country's education secretary, sees "potential" for "modest continuing growth" in the number of international undergraduates.

Another benefit that universities would gain from independence, according to Murray Pittcock, Bradley professor of English literature at the University of Glasgow, is that the Scottish government would be free to pursue its own foreign policy without the UK "confusing" diplomatic relationships by pursuing a different agenda. Hence, the government in Edinburgh would be freer to promote Scottish universities abroad and to strike up partnerships.

But the lure of the British higher education brand to international students is strong. Last year, for instance, the UK was judged the third most attractive country for study behind the US and Canada by [the Agent Barometer survey](http://monitor.icef.com/2013/11/seventh-annual-agent-barometer-provides-agents-view-of-marketplace) (URL=<http://monitor.icef.com/2013/11/seventh-annual-agent-barometer-provides-agents-view-of-marketplace>).

According to Steve Chapman, vice-chancellor of Heriot-Watt University, the buses on the university's Dubai campus bear the slogan "elite British education since 1821". "If it happens that the Scottish card helps, then I'll play the Scottish card...but, in general, the default would be 'British education'," he says.

But if Scotland became independent, it is not clear that Heriot-Watt would have to stop calling itself "British", he adds, as it would still be located in "the British Isles".

## Responsibility: the current system

### Devolved issues

- **Teaching funding**  
Distributed by the Scottish Funding Council. Scottish universities do not charge tuition fees for Scottish-domiciled undergraduates.
- **Widening participation**  
The Scottish Funding Council requires universities to produce "outcome agreements", which can include recruitment targets for students from poor neighbourhoods.
- **Student complaints**  
These are handled by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, which deals with the whole public sector. Unlike the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, which covers England and Wales, it names institutions involved in its judgements.

### Mixed approach

- **Research funding**  
About a third of research funding comes from the devolved Scottish Funding Council. However, distribution is based on the results of the UK-wide research excellence framework, in which an [independent Scotland would be likely to continue participating](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/hefce-looks-at-overseas-links-for-research-excellence/2012572.article) (URL=<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/hefce-looks-at-overseas-links-for-research-excellence/2012572.article>). A further quarter of funding comes from the UK-wide research councils and national academies, and 13 per cent comes from charities, some of which are based in England.
- **Representation**  
Scottish universities are represented by Universities UK and its council in Scotland, Universities Scotland. Even in the event of independence, there would be an "appetite" to maintain the former body, chief executive Nicola Dandridge said in April.
- **Quality**  
The whole of the UK is covered by the Quality Assurance Agency, which conducts reviews of institutions and warns them if they are failing. But the QAA in Scotland conducts slightly different reviews and has pioneered an emphasis on the student experience.
- **Unions**

The University and College Union operates north of the border, and Scottish academics joined the recent strike action over pay. However, UCU Scotland has an autonomous executive that lobbies the Edinburgh government, and some academics in Scotland are members of an alternative union, the Educational Institute of Scotland.

#### Issues not devolved

- **Immigration**

Immigration policy on international students and staff from outside the European Union applies across the UK.

#### Essay competition

*Times Higher Education* is running an essay competition in collaboration with the Higher Education Policy Institute on what Scottish independence would mean for higher education. [Click here for more information](http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2014/05/02/scottish-independence-higher-education-new-hepi-times-higher-essay-competition/) (URL=<http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2014/05/02/scottish-independence-higher-education-new-hepi-times-higher-essay-competition/>) . Please submit entries by 3 July 2014.



(URL=<http://www.tslshop.co.uk/thed->

[ts/THEDO75/?utm\\_source=THE&utm\\_medium=Features&utm\\_content=THEDO75&utm\\_campaign=freetrial](http://www.tslshop.co.uk/thed-))

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