

AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

Scots fear losing access to UK research council system

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

Paper reveals that university principals worry more about a common research area than English 'fee refugees'



Source: Alamy

Under scrutiny: research areas

With the [referendum on Scottish independence](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/what-might-independence-mean-for-scotlands-universities/2013795.article) (URL=<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/what-might-independence-mean-for-scotlands-universities/2013795.article>) less than three months away, the biggest higher education battleground has been over whether a separate Scotland would be allowed to continue charging English students tuition fees under European Union law – and if not whether this could lead to a flood of English “fee refugees” heading north of the border.

But that is not what keeps Scottish university principals awake at night – they worry more about remaining in the UK’s research council system, according to research drawing on anonymous interviews with 32 sector figures north of the border.

A common research area taking in the remainder of the UK and a newly independent Scotland could become a hot issue if the country votes “yes” on 18 September because Scottish universities win more money from the councils than would be expected from the population share. In 2011-12, Scottish universities claimed 15.2 per cent of research council grant funding despite the country’s having about 8 per cent of the UK’s population.

To continue the status quo after independence could be seen as a subsidy from one country to another.

The Scottish National Party wants present arrangements to continue, arguing that this would best serve both countries, but “university managers believed that negotiations might founder over issues of funding, governance and priorities”, concludes [the research by Sheila Riddell](http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/education/creid/Projects/34ii_f_ESRCF_WP5.pdf) (URL=http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/education/creid/Projects/34ii_f_ESRCF_WP5.pdf), director of the Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity at the University of Edinburgh. The question is “even more critical” to those interviewed than that of tuition fees.

One civil servant interviewed said that the decision on whether or not to keep the area “ultimately has to be London’s, you’d have to assume. And they would probably call that very much on the basis of what the English universities said to them.”

English universities “might be inclined to be a little bit protective about funding”, the civil servant went on, and academics in Scotland were “immensely nervous” about a new, separate Scottish research council. “I think it’s interesting that they’re being very quiet about all that, and it tells you a lot about their relationship with government that they’re not making a bigger fuss about this in public.”

A senior university manager said the decision on access to the research councils is “terribly important”. Another said: “Maintaining a single research area is absolutely critical.”

Another top manager felt that continued Scottish participation in the research excellence framework was “bound up” with common research councils: “The capacity of Scotland to really present itself to the outside world on a peer-based review process that is contained within Scottish Borders I think would be not so good as operating within a UK system.”

It [has been suggested](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/state-of-independence-could-prove-costly-scots-warned/2004011.article) (URL=<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/state-of-independence-could-prove-costly-scots-warned/2004011.article>) that there could be a compromise in which Scottish universities stay in a common research area but receive no more funding from it than the Edinburgh government puts in.

The research is the fifth working paper from an Economic and Social Research Council-funded project on the future of the UK and Scotland.

On tuition fees, interviewees were “sceptical” that an independent Scotland would be able to continue charging students from the rest of the UK.

david.matthews@tsleducation.com



(URL=[http://www.tsishop.co.uk/thed-tsl/THEDOA73/?utm_source=THE&](http://www.tsishop.co.uk/thed-tsl/THEDOA73/?utm_source=THE&utm_medium=News&utm_content=THEDOA73&utm_campaign=freetrial)

[utm_medium=News&utm_content=THEDOA73&utm_campaign=freetrial](http://www.tsishop.co.uk/thed-tsl/THEDOA73/?utm_source=THE&utm_medium=News&utm_content=THEDOA73&utm_campaign=freetrial))

Print headline:

Article originally published as: *In or out? The nightmare north of the border* (3 July 2014)