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Essay on the impact an independent Scotland would have on its universities

Submitted by Christopher R. Marsicano on September 15, 2014 - 3:00am

On Friday, 6 million people who went to sleep the night previous in the United Kingdom could wake up in a completely different country. After years of mounting pressure, the Scottish National Party (SNP) has finally gotten its way: a referendum on Scottish independence. A “no” vote will maintain the status quo – Scotland will remain part of the United Kingdom. A “yes” vote will kick off two years of tense negotiations between the Scottish government and the UK government to finalize the terms of Scottish independence.

While previously seen by many as a quixotic enterprise, Scottish independence has gained traction and for the first time is leading in the polls [1]. A vote for independence will lead to dramatic changes for Scottish universities. In the worst-case scenarios, independence could bring a dramatic loss in research funding, an exodus of faculty from Scotland’s top institutions, and either an imposition of tuition or fewer opportunities for students.

As part of the UK, Scotland punches above its weight with regard to research funding. Even with new taxation powers independence would bring, there is no guarantee that an independent Scottish government could maintain current funding levels to make up the deficit. According to a British government analysis [2], Scottish higher education institutions receive around 13.1 percent, or £257 million (\$418 million), of UK Research Council funding. When one considers that Scotland constitutes only 8.4 percent of the total UK population and 9 percent of total tax contributions, the university system clearly benefits from being part of the UK. Even when removing the University of Edinburgh, the institution that receives the most UK Research Council funding in Scotland, at 30 percent of the Scottish total, Scotland still receives funding in excess of its proportion of GDP and the UK population.

Scottish universities receive 82 percent of their funding from public sources, but only 30 percent of Scottish research funding is uniquely Scottish in its origin, from the Scottish-government-backed Scottish Funding Council. Scottish taxes account for part, but not all, of university funding, which also includes European research grants, United Kingdom Research Council, and other public sources of funding.

If, as pro-independence leaders suggest, Scotland would be able to remain in the European Union, European funding would likely remain at similar levels. Automatic EU membership, however, is far from assured. In fact, the president of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, has suggested that Scotland would have to apply for membership. Membership through application is

unlikely to happen, as member nations with large separatist movements within their borders – countries such as Spain and Belgium – are likely to veto Scottish membership. Without EU membership, the 15 percent of the Scottish research budget made up by European grants would be in doubt.

A loss of funding could result in broad negative effects on the Scottish higher education system, but one of the most detrimental could be the loss of top-tier faculty and researchers. Scottish researchers are extraordinarily efficient. They produce more publications per researcher than faculty in the rest of the UK [3], Ireland, Belgium, and the Nordic countries. Their per-researcher publication rate is almost three times the rate in the United States. Independence-driven funding decreases might cause a decline in those rates as top researchers leave for greener pastures. Reduced funding would make it harder to complete complex research projects, and faculty may look to nations with larger research budgets as better places to produce impactful research.

Even if research funding were to remain the same, Scottish faculty may still move south of the border for fear of losing their pensions. There is currently no plan setting out the way Scottish pensions and benefits would be paid [4] with independence. This uncertainty over pensions and benefits could also impact recruitment efforts, as it could be hard to convince newly minted Ph.D.s to start research agendas in Scotland if they have opportunities in more stable circumstances.

As Scottish faculty leave, English students might arrive due to possible changes in the tuition structure. If the Yes campaign is correct about Scotland's ability to remain in the European Union, current tuition policies for non-Scottish students will likely be challenged in European courts. Currently, all Scottish students can attend universities within the country free of charge. Students from the rest of Britain, however, must pay up to £9,000 (\$14,600) in tuition to attend Scottish universities. The SNP suggests that the status quo will remain should Scotland gain independence. If Scotland does not maintain its membership in the European Union, this is certainly correct. In a scenario in which Scotland finds a way into the European Union, legal experts disagree with the SNP and suggest the new nation's universities likely would not be able to charge tuition to UK students any longer.

Since the Maastricht Treaty established the European Union in 1992, member states have subscribed to a doctrine of nondiscrimination in higher education. Member states may adopt their own rules, admission processes, and fees, but may not discriminate against nationals from other member states. European judges have chosen to uphold this policy in the past, preventing universities in Belgium and Austria from establishing differential tuition rates and admission policies for French and Austrian students, respectively.

Scotland is currently able to charge tuition fees to students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The policy is perceived as a domestic policy. If Scotland were to vote for independence, the domestic policy would become foreign policy. To pass legal muster, Scottish universities would either have to charge all students or provide a Scottish university education free of charge to students from the rest of the UK and EU.

Losing the ability to charge tuition from students in the rest of the United Kingdom may not negatively impact the most prestigious institutions like the University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, or St. Andrews University. Tuition payments from the rest of the UK make up less than 5 percent of net assets at each of those institutions and their academic quality would likely make them continue to be desirable for many students. For the less-selective institutions, however, the potential loss of tuition revenue could have drastic consequences. At Abertay University, for example, tuition payments from the rest of Britain make up nearly a fifth of the university budget.

In short, Scottish universities in an independent EU-member Scotland can't offer different rates to British and other EU students. The alternative is charging a new tuition rate for all students, regardless of citizenship status. In either scenario, Scottish students are the losers – either for fewer

available spots at the new nation's universities or having to pay tuition for an education that was previously free.

While no outcome is guaranteed, a vote for independence could result in less research funding, faculty leaving their posts for better opportunities in the rest of the UK and elsewhere, and negative outcomes for students. While potential benefits of Scottish independence might exist in other arenas, the Scottish higher education system will experience the status quo at best and diffuse negative effects at worst.

With such negative potential consequences related to independence, Scots who have any relationship with their nation's universities should overwhelmingly oppose the ballot measure. Doing so is the only way to guarantee stable research funding, maintenance of an extraordinarily productive faculty, and a future free of tuition payments for Scottish students. Yet, academics have split into three camps – those who support the movement, those who believe the nation is better as part of the union, and those who have yet to weigh in on the subject. While students voted down independence [5] in mock referendums at two Glasgow universities, students at the city's University of Strathclyde supported the measure in a similar exercise. The universities themselves refuse to take a stance, either out of a misplaced desire to remain neutral or for fear of retribution from SNP ministers. [6] Why such mixed messages from the higher education community when the prospect of independence so adversely affects Scottish universities?

The future of higher education in the country where scientists dreamed up Dolly the sheep and the Higgs-Boson particle is simply not swaying the minds of voters – even those related to the universities themselves. Perhaps voters take the strength of Scottish universities for granted, or perhaps anxieties about Scotland's economic prospects, distaste for the future of a Tory-led UK, and a romantic sense of patriotism have all outweighed any concerns about higher education. Neither situation is good for universities, and both have broad implications for universities everywhere.

Scotland is only one of several regions in European countries seeking independence. Independence movements aren't some fleeting trend – they are here to stay, and universities in those countries must be ready to act if those movements gain traction.

Even in nations where no real threat of secession exists, like the United States, voters often fail to assess the policy implications of the ballots they cast when it comes to their public universities. In an era where public institution budget cuts persist despite the waning of austerity measures, the Scottish independence referendum should provide a warning to universities everywhere – engage in the national debate, or risk being an afterthought on Election Day.

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