

## Education and Culture Committee

### Scotland's Educational and Cultural Future

#### Professor David Raffe

1. The following comments draw on my own and colleagues' research, but are made in a personal capacity. They cover some of the topics listed under Further and Higher Education in the Committee's call, which is informed by *Scotland's Future*. However, the independence referendum has implications for a wider set of issues, some of which I summarise below. I focus on higher education.
2. One such issue concerns the role of higher education and its relation to government. Since parliamentary devolution all the devolved governments have emphasised higher education's role of supporting economic development, its social and cultural functions and its need to complement other sectors of education and training in a coherent lifelong learning system.<sup>1</sup> The devolved governments are much closer to their universities and they have tried to exercise greater control over them. These trends, which are likely to continue in the event either of further devolution or of independence, have caused tensions and raised concerns about institutional autonomy. So far these tensions have – at least within Scotland – been broadly manageable, thanks to a relatively consensual style of policy-making, the willingness of Scottish universities to find common cause and work together, and a recognition that Scottish universities are a national asset and a source of comparative advantage. However, whatever arrangements are put in place after the referendum, they will need to strike a careful balance between universities' need for institutional autonomy and their accountability to Scottish government and society.
3. The four higher education systems of the UK are interdependent; in many respects they constitute a single system. They are part of a UK (or global) market for staff, research funding and other resources; they share a common admissions system and experience substantial cross-border flows of students; they share many other services and facilities, as well as a wider intellectual infrastructure of learned societies, disciplinary bodies and professional associations; and they have a shared interest in a UK 'brand'. This interdependence would not be greatly affected by Scottish independence, especially if the proposal in *Scotland's Future* to maintain a common UK research area were achieved. However, the effect of this interdependence, and of the dominant position of England within UK higher education, has been to restrict the autonomy of the devolved administrations, and force them to adopt reactive policies in response to initiatives in England.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, T. (2012) *Universities and constitutional change in the UK: the impact of devolution on the higher education sector*. Higher Education Policy Unit, Oxford. Raffe, D. (2013) *Devolution and Higher Education: What next?* Stimulus Paper. Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. <http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/research-resources/publications/index.cfm/ST%20-%2015>

<sup>2</sup> Gallacher, J. and Raffe, D. (2012) Higher education policy in post-devolution UK: more convergence than divergence? *Journal of Education Policy* 27, 4, 467-490. Raffe, D. and Croxford, L. (2013) One system or four? Cross-border applications and entries to full-time undergraduate courses in the UK since devolution. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 67, 2, 111-134.

4. The ideal of the UK as a partnership suggests that it provides the context in which to resolve the conflicts and tensions that arise from this interdependence. This has not happened. Successive reports have criticised the inadequate arrangements for coordinating government policy across the four home countries.<sup>3</sup> The failure of policy coordination among the UK 'partners' is reflected in the fee increases in England in 2006 and 2012. These were introduced with minimal consideration for, or consultation with, the devolved governments, but they have dominated their subsequent policy agendas and constrained their freedom of action and (notably in the case of Wales) forced them to introduce policies that contradict their stated policy aspirations. Whether or not Scotland becomes an independent country, it should seek more effective ways of coordinating policy with England and the other UK nations.
5. Among the leaders and principal stakeholders in higher education there is widespread support for the preservation of a UK higher education area and a UK research area.<sup>4</sup> This would involve continued Scottish support for, and access to, the UK-wide infrastructure which provides services relating to such matters as admissions, support for teaching, computing and ICT, quality assurance and the funding and assessment of research. It should be possible to negotiate such involvement in the event of independence. In the case of the Research Councils (possibly the most contentious issue), an appropriate contribution could be related, not to Scotland's share of the population, but to its share of the science base, which is similar to Scotland's proportion of total Research Council spending.<sup>5</sup> The main benefits of participation in a UK research area are qualitative, not financial; they relate to such issues as critical mass, quality assurance, access to shared resources and membership of a knowledge community. To focus the debate on marginal gains or losses in funding is to miss the point. Many of the things which encourage collaboration across the UK would not be directly affected by constitutional change. These include informal networks and collaborations, learned societies, disciplinary and professional bodies, and European and international funding and collaborations. Half of Scotland's research papers are co-authored with researchers from outside the UK.
6. An independent Scotland within the EU would probably not be permitted to continue to charge students from the rest of the UK for tuition while offering it free to Scottish students. If free tuition were available to students from across the UK, it is unlikely that this would lead to an immediate large influx of 'fee refugees'. Scottish higher education has less porous boundaries than (say) Wales: for example, among full-time first-degree students starting in 2011, 11% were from the rest of the UK, compared with more than half in Wales. This proportion has declined over the past two decades, and the incomers tend to be an atypical group of well-qualified and socially advantaged students, studying particular

---

<sup>3</sup> Trench, A. (2008) *Higher Education and Devolution*. London: Universities UK. Bruce, *Universities and constitutional change in the UK*. Raffae, *Devolution and Higher Education*, op cit. Coordination among the Funding Councils has been more effective.

<sup>4</sup> Based on interviews conducted by Sarah Minty, Sheila Riddell and Elisabet Weedon for the ESRC Fellowship project on *Higher Education in Scotland, the Devolution Settlement and the Referendum on Independence*. See also Royal Society of Edinburgh (2013) *Enlightening the Constitutional Debate: Science and Higher Education*. <http://www.royalsoced.org.uk/cms/files/events/reports/2013-2014/Science-and-Higher-Education.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> See Lindsay Paterson's contribution to RSE, *Enlightening the Constitutional Debate*, op cit.

subjects (medicine, arts) in particular institutions (the ancient universities).<sup>6</sup> The evidence suggests that the flows of students between jurisdictions do respond to changing fee differentials, but the response is often relatively small.<sup>7</sup> Students tend to follow well-trodden pathways to university, and many potential students would continue to be put off by such factors as longer distances and longer degrees. It is possible that they would no longer be able to use the current loan arrangements to cover the costs of maintenance for study in Scotland.

7. In the longer term, however, it is probable that the inflow of students from the residual UK would increase, were an independent Scotland to retain free tuition. The different relative sizes of England and Scotland mean that even a small proportionate increase in English students coming to Scotland would represent a large increase in the proportion of students at Scottish universities from the rest of the UK. Scotland would therefore need a 'Plan B'. One option, which may be permitted under EU rules, would be to introduce tuition fees and use the funding thereby released to provide maintenance support for residents in Scotland of more than five years' standing. Although there are several possible reasons for wishing to avoid tuition fees for full-time undergraduates in Scotland, the desire to reduce inequality and widen access – a main theme of Scotland's Future – is probably not one of them. Scotland's policy of free tuition has not helped to reduce inequalities of access;<sup>8</sup> nor, conversely, have the increases in fees in England in 2006 and in 2012 increased social inequalities in access, at least among young people.
8. I would be happy to discuss any of these issues or provide further information as required.

David Raffe  
Centre for Educational Sociology  
The University of Edinburgh  
3 March 2014

---

<sup>6</sup> Croxford, L. and Raffe, D. (2014) Student flows across the UK's internal boundaries: entrants to full-time degree courses in 2011. Working Paper 4. Project on *Higher Education, the devolution settlement and the referendum on independence*. University of Edinburgh. Croxford and Raffe, One system or four? Op cit.

<sup>7</sup> Whittaker, S. (2014) Student cross-border mobility within the UK: a summary of research findings. Working Paper 2. Project on *Higher Education, the devolution settlement and the referendum on independence*. University of Edinburgh.

<sup>8</sup> Croxford, L. and Raffe, D. (2013) *Participation in full-time higher education 1996-2010: a 'home international' perspective*. CES Briefing No 62. CES, University of Edinburgh.