

Nothing to fear, here

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As Scotland gears up for next autumn's referendum on independence from the UK, researchers — like everyone else — are starting to contemplate what such a step would mean for their own livelihoods.

Some scientists are rather apprehensive at the prospect of constitutional change. A few have argued publicly that Scotland's researchers should vote No in the referendum, lest they lose their right to compete for grants from the UK research councils. (Scotland wins about 12% of the six council's £3 billion annual funding, with less than 9% of the UK population.)

I want to begin by looking at the place that research and the universities hold in the context of the wider constitutional question.

Most of the major institutions in Scottish society land were either separate in the first place (school education, the law) or have drifted apart, or lost significance, in recent years (the labour movement, the health service).

That has left the university system, together with the armed forces, as one of the main institutions still binding the United Kingdom together. And although few academics have the Union Jack tattooed on their biceps, many have worked both north and south of the border, and are unenthusiastic about constitutional change.

But even at the universities, change is already underway. Under the Scotland Act, 'research' was one of a handful of powers that were reserved in London, while 'the universities' were devolved. In practice, that means that half of the universities' research money now comes from the Scottish government, through the Scottish Funding Council. Since then, as we all know, Scotland's higher education policy has since diverged sharply from its English counterpart.

The UK Research Councils still operate on a UK-wide basis, and it is their loss, in the event of Scottish independence, that some researchers

fear. The research councils are competently run, but not quite the models of rectitude their supporters make them out to be.

In recent years, their autonomy — from each other, as well as from Whitehall — has visibly weakened. In the unique manner of the British quango, they are vulnerable to pressure from their managing department, though a process that is neither transparent, nor accountable to parliament. Take the history of the Living with Environmental Change programme at NERC: introduced under Labour, quietly dismembered under the coalition government. Even the strongest research council, the MRC, has lost some of its lustre in recent years, with its headquarters closed and half of its discontented staff sent off to Swindon.

Agencies that dispense peer-reviewed grants do not necessarily improve with age: rather, their biases become ingrained. It is quite possible to begin afresh: Science Foundation Ireland was built from nothing in 2000 and the European Research Council (ERC) has established a formidable reputation in just six years.

The principles of competitive peer-review are well-established and there is little danger, in my view, of an independent Scotland failing to implement them. Indeed it is quite striking that since devolution, it has become clear that research and higher education hold a stronger place within the hierarchy of national interests in Edinburgh, than they have ever done in London. Any future Scottish government is likely to regard research excellence as a very high priority indeed.

There are several options for managing research in the event of an independent Scotland. They include sticking with the UK research councils (Scotland could participate in their processes and then pay for the awards it wins, as non-EU members do in EU research programmes). Scotland could also set up agencies of its own: perhaps one for biomedical research inside the health department, and a second for other scientific disciplines, as in the United States.

Neither approach need endanger the performance of Scotland's universities. The latter path could, in time, better align Scottish university research with Scottish priorities, such as public health, forestry and fisheries, and renewable and offshore energy. That doesn't compromise the importance of curiosity-driven research: all nations, the UK included, align their overall research policies with national needs.

In any case, the global research university is a function of its own history, its host city, and other circumstances — not of its national government. Small nations are the strongest scientific performers in Europe: in the 2012 round of ERC starting grants, for example, the best performers per head were Switzerland, Holland, Israel and Denmark, in that order. There's no empirical evidence that access to large research systems (such as those of the UK, Germany or the United States) confers excellence.

Last autumn, I asked Ernst Winnacker, former head of both of the DFG and the ERC, about the track record of university reform in Germany. He spoke wistfully of the strength of the Swiss system, and of the relative success of reforms in Austria. A Scottish research system could be modernized and optimized more readily than is the case with the established UK system.

It is understandable that researchers will be apprehensive about *any* move by the political class to reform the structures that provide their funding, whether related to independence or not. But I believe that Scottish researchers realise that there are bigger stakes here — no stakes could be larger, after all, than the future of our country — and that constitutional change need not threaten scientific excellence. Instead, it should be seen, in research policy as elsewhere, as an opportunity to move towards better, more transparent, and more accountable governance.