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How will Brexit affect Scottish Education?

By Stephen J. McKinney

The educational communities of the constituent parts of the United Kingdom have adopted a note of caution and have emphasized that there will be no immediate changes in the wake of the Brexit vote. Nevertheless, they are now in the process of assessing the full range of implications of Brexit for education. There are additional complexities and uncertainties in Scotland where all of the 32 council areas voted to remain in the European Union (62% voted to remain, higher than Northern Ireland). This has created further questions and debates about: the continued possibility of Scottish independence; the construction(s) of Scottish identity and the potential of an independent Scotland that would aim to respect the wishes of the Scottish electorate and remain in the EU. The Scottish First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has stated that Brexit has resulted in Scotland being in ‘unchartered territory’.

The discussion on Brexit does not exist in a vacuum and is best understood within an overview of the contemporary challenges already faced by Higher Education and school education in Scotland. The people of Scotland are proud of the history and the growth and development of the Scottish Higher Education sector. *Universities Scotland* recently celebrated the inclusion of five Scottish universities in the Times Higher top 200 and seven other universities among the top five per cent in the world. This success, however, is within the context of funding cuts in Scottish Higher Education of around 3.5 per cent for 2016/2017. The strategies for economic savings entail proposed cuts in staffing and a number of universities (Dundee, Robert Gordon and UWS) launched voluntary severance schemes. The University of Aberdeen recently announced compulsory job cuts, a result of the low uptake on the VS scheme offered to staff in the School of Medicine, Medical Science and Nutrition. This context creates serious anxieties about: the future prospects for staff in Higher Education and the detrimental impact on staff morale; maintaining a high quality experience of learning and teaching for students and the capacity to sustain world-leading research in a highly competitive Higher Education sector. In school education, the Scottish Government has recently launched the Scottish Attainment Challenge to address the ‘attainment gap’ in schools. Some aspects of this initiative, for example in the National Improvement Framework, have been hotly debated. The government has made a public commitment to tackle the problem of chronic child poverty in Scotland, which limits the opportunities for many young people and there are ongoing and tense discussions with the EIS, the main teaching union, about teacher workload.

The uncertainty about the consequences of Brexit has served to exacerbate some of these tensions in Scottish Education. There are anxieties around a number of issues that are similar to the issues identified in other parts of the UK: overseas students; exchange and mobility opportunities for students and staff in Scottish universities; freedom of movement and permission to work for academics and the key issue of research funding.

Concerns have been expressed about the funding models for European students studying in Scotland and Scottish students studying in Europe. The Scottish government and Universities Scotland have issued reassurances that there is currently

no change in funding arrangements for students from the EU and the students will continue to enjoy free tuition. There is no certainty that this will be continued, unless possibly within an independent Scotland. On a wider scale, there is unease concerning the protection and safety of some overseas students as Scotland, similar to other parts of the UK and Europe, has experienced a disturbing and sharp rise in Islamophobia and a rise in anti-Semitism in the last few years.

There are serious questions about the future of student mobility and exchange through programmes such as Erasmus +. While Erasmus + has confirmed that there will be no immediate changes, there may be changes in the future. Erasmus + is considered to be highly beneficial for Scottish students enabling them to study and undertake placements in Europe. This enhances their international experiences, cultural competence and intercultural education. Any changes will also affect staff mobility for teaching and knowledge exchange purposes.

As of yet there is no clarification on future restrictions on freedom of movement and agreements about permission to work in the UK and in Europe. There is disquiet about being able to continue to attract, and provide opportunities for, European academics to work in the Scottish HE sector – academics who make an important contribution to intellectual life and research and help to create an authentic international HE culture. Similar challenges may be faced by Scottish academics seeking employment in HE in European universities. Any barriers to these reciprocal arrangements could affect the interface between Scottish HE and the wider European and international academy.

There are anxieties about the continuation of European research funding and the future of funded collaborative research projects with European partners. Any curtailment on the participation of Scottish academics will have an impact on research income streams for universities, the international dimension of research and potentially on the quality of research. This will inevitably lead to Scottish universities reconfiguring research strategies to seek new funding sources and aligning with alternative international research partners, or consolidating and expanding the collaboration with existing non-EU research collaborators. At this stage, we can only speculate on whether these would be as successful as some of the European research collaborations.

Brexit has prompted much debate and discussion about the future of HE and school education in Scotland. This is indeed ‘unchartered territory’ yet, interestingly and ironically, in the midst of all of the unsettling rhetoric about what may be threatened, damaged or lost in formal education, there has emerged a clear articulation of what is most valued in Scottish Education and the educational interface with Europe and what should be preserved, where possible.

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