

Scottish scientists look to a more independent future

Despite 'no' to independence, a promised push for decentralization could benefit research in Scotland and other UK regions.

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Scotland's pro-independence campaign lost, but the region could still see greater autonomy.

In the run-up to the referendum on Scottish independence, UK Prime Minister David Cameron and other politicians made what some saw as panicked pre-vote pledges to give more autonomy to Scotland's local government if it remained part of the United Kingdom.

As the dust settles after the 18 September vote, in which [55% of Scotland's residents said no to independence](#), scientists and policy-makers are looking for positive outcomes for research that such autonomy could bring.

The situation is [markedly less uncertain than if Scotland had voted for independence](#) — which would have opened many questions about its access to funding from UK bodies and the European Union.

Scotland already has control over some of its spending, notably on health and education — it has kept its universities free for Scottish students, for example, whereas tuition fees in England have soared.

Exactly what powers will be transferred from the UK Parliament to its Scottish equivalent is not clear, but the shift is likely to give Scotland more control of taxes and how they are spent.

The day after the referendum, Cameron appointed Robert Smith, a member of the House of Lords and chancellor of the University of Strathclyde, to oversee the devolution process, saying that proposals for transfer of “powers over tax, spending and welfare” will be agreed by November.

The extent of the devolution is likely to fall short of the far-reaching autonomy sometimes referred to as ‘devo max’, which would transfer nearly all powers apart from control over defence and foreign affairs.

A major overhaul of government funding for Scottish science is unlikely, but promised extra spending and taxation power are likely. The Scottish National Party, which campaigns for independence and currently runs the local government, promised to strengthen research

in the event of independence, with financial incentives for research and easy immigration for top scientists.

Wider constitutional reform could also result in more powers for the devolved government of Wales and in changes for Northern Ireland.

If more power ends up in the hands of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, canny scientists from these regions have a shot at getting a slice of it, especially given that UK politicians seem keen to keep these governments happy. Other interest groups, from finance to construction, will be pushing their cases for special treatment from regional governments too.

"I suspect that the fright caused to politicians south of the border by the sudden realization that there was a real prospect that Scotland might leave the United Kingdom has left its mark, and cunning Scottish scientists might use this to their advantage in getting even more resources north of the border," says Hugh Pennington, a bacteriologist at the University of Aberdeen and a supporter of the 'no' campaign in Scotland's referendum. "They should move quickly because the Welsh and Northern Irish will be busy too."

Scientists who pushed for Scottish independence are also looking to see how science can benefit from the vote's outcome. "Obviously I'm disappointed," says John Howell, a geologist at the University of Aberdeen and a member of the lobbying group Academics for Yes. "But I think we have to focus on the positives."

Howell thinks that more power for Scotland is likely to mean more money for research and universities, but he is cautious. "I would like to be optimistic, but I'd also like to see more details of what's on the table," he says.

Stephen Watson, an applied mathematician at the University of Glasgow and co-founder of Academics for Yes, says he hopes that the group will continue to work to boost research and science in Scotland. "What's grown is something quite novel and rich, and it shouldn't be left to wither," he says.

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