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Open letter - Scotland: Research and the UK Academies

The potential separation of Scotland from the rest of the UK is one of the most significant constitutional issues that we have faced in the last three centuries. It is a decision for those who live in Scotland, but their decision will have profound implications for the whole of the UK. In taking their decision, the people of Scotland will have many perspectives and criteria in mind.

As Presidents of UK-wide academies, we wish to draw attention to just one area which we regard as critical. That is research, in which Scotland punches well above its weight internationally. Many people involved in research in Scotland are concerned about this issue but some appear to feel inhibited in expressing their views.

Research requires resources, permeability, interactions, critical mass and a highly skilled workforce, to drive improvements in the quality of lives and a modern knowledge-based economy. Scotland has long done particularly well through its access to UK research funding. If it turns out that an independent Scotland has to form its own science and research budget, maintaining these levels of research spending would cost the Scottish tax payer significantly more.

Moreover, if Scotland is separated from the rest of the UK, the strong links and collaborations which exist in the current open system would be put at risk, with any new machinery put in place to attempt to restore them likely to be expensive and bureaucratic.

We believe that if separation were to occur, research not only in Scotland but also in the rest of the UK would suffer. However, research in Scotland would be more vulnerable and there could be significant reductions in range, capability and critical mass.

We therefore call for a more open debate concerning these crucial issues. We have all gained much from integration and interaction in academic and research life, in which Scotland plays such a strong role.

Yours faithfully

Sir Paul Nurse PRS FMedSci, President of the Royal Society
Lord Stern Kt PBA FRS, President of the British Academy
Sir John Tooke PMedSci, President of the Academy of Medical Sciences