

Dreaming of a more democratic academy

As a member of staff at a Scottish university I found *Times Higher Education's* latest issue of particular interest.

Ferdinand von Prondzynski's opinion piece ("Divergence has delivered results", News, 14 August) made the familiar case for Scottish exceptionalism – its "democratic intellect" tradition – in matters of higher education ethos. As the author recognises, the recommendations of the Review of Higher Education Governance that he chaired "sparked some debate", not only as far as the election of governing body chairs but also, one might add, on the proposed introduction of gender quotas on governing boards.

Testament to the sparkling debate is the fact that, more than two years later, there is still no legislation to implement such recommendations. One might even question the current good health of the democratic intellect tradition itself, at least judging from the opinions expressed by Thomas Swann, winner of the "yes" category in the Scottish independence essay competition ("Visions of independence", Features, 14 August).

Swann writes that: "Scotland's universities [have] generally gone in much the same direction as those in the rest of the UK" in key areas such as metrics, the research excellence framework, zero-hours contracts and the National Student Survey, hence, he concludes that "the Scottish higher education system is little better than in the rest of the UK". Swann's rage at the status quo is mitigated only by his (romantic) hope that independence will deliver "another university". Maybe he imagines a cooperative one ("All together now: towards cooperatives", Analysis, 14 August), whose implementation would "simply" entail changing a university mission, as its proponents (again romantically) envisage.

So where does all this leave a cynically-inclined academic who still believes passionately in the possibility of a more democratic academia? In the uncomfortable certainty that whatever the result of the independence referendum Scottish academia is unlikely to become a garden of Eden, because as Felipe Fernández-Armesto realistically acknowledges in "Trouble in paradise" (Opinion, 14 August), "there are serpents in every Eden".

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