IRASS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
https://irasspublisher.com/journal-details/IJAHSS
ISSN *(Online) 3049-0170*

The Bidirectional Influence of Scottish Welfare Policy and National Identity

Chen Qiqi*

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai

Corresponding Author Chen Qiqi

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai

Article History

Received: 06 / 09 / 2025

Accepted: 25 / 09 / 2025

Published: 29 / 09 /2025

Abstract: In the context of devolution, Scotland has shaped a distinct national identity through differentiated social welfare policies. This paper examines Scotland's welfare policies in education, healthcare, and social services, employing literature analysis and comparative research methods to explore the two-way relationship between welfare policies and identity construction. The study aims to provide a comparative case for identity research in other regions of the UK.

Keywords: Welfare Policy; Scotland; National Identity.

How to Cite in APA format: Qiqi, C. (2025). The Bidirectional Influence of Scottish Welfare Policy and National Identity. *IRASS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, 2(9),133-137.*

1. Analysis of the Formation Causes of Scottish Welfare Policies

1.1 Research Background

In the United Kingdom, devolution refers to the UK Parliament transferring certain domestic powers—excluding defense and foreign affairs—to the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh National Assembly, and the Northern Ireland Assembly under statutes such as the *Scotland Act*. These bodies then make decisions and establish policies, which are implemented by their respective administrative bodies: the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government, and the Northern Ireland Executive. Finance has consistently been the most reluctant area for the UK to devolve (Zhao Ding, 2018). Consequently, the UK government is very cautious about devolving fiscal powers, using the"Barnett Formula"to allocate funds to devolved governments. The UK Treasury retains full discretionary control over these allocations, as fiscal authority serves as the central government's key tool for controlling local governments. If devolved governments lack funds, their administrative functions will inevitably be severely constrained (Wang Lei & Qu Bing, 2021).

In 1707, the union between Scotland and England unified defense, parliament, the monarchy, the national flag and seal, civil rights and obligations, currency and weights and measures, as well as largely consistent tax rates. However, it did not achieve uniformity in judiciary, religion, education, or local governance, allowing Scotland to largely maintain its autonomous traditions in these areas. This "semi-autonomous" status has persisted to this day (Hu Li, 2021). In the latter half of the 20th century, Scottish nationalism rose, with nationalists leveraging the relative independence gained from devolution to promote Scotland's distinct development. On September 11, 1997, a pre-legislative referendum was held on re-establishing a devolved parliament with the power to vary taxes and pass laws on Scottish domestic affairs. The results showed that 74.3% of voters supported the creation of a Scottish Parliament. The following year, the UK Parliament passed the Scotland Act 1998, formally granting the Scottish Parliament limited autonomy—including the power to adjust income tax by up to 3% (though this authority has never been exercised). In 1999, the Scottish Parliament was officially established, gaining administrative powers in areas such as education, healthcare, and agriculture, along with partial fiscal authority. By 2014, in the context of an independence referendum—a matter falling under the UK government's "reserved powers"—the British government compromised by authorizing Scotland to organize its own referendum. Ahead of the vote, the UK's three major political parties pledged that if Scotland rejected independence, it would be granted further devolved powers, including greater autonomy in fiscal policy, taxation, and welfare.

Scotland has been the region with the most extensive devolution of powers in the UK. In the UK Parliament, Scottish MPs retain the right to vote on legislation affecting England, while English MPs have no say in matters devolved to the Scottish Parliament—a constitutional asymmetry known as the"West Lothian Question". Moreover, per capita public spending in England is 10-20% lower than in devolved regions like Scotland (Bogdanor, 2009). Ahead of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, the Scottish National Party (SNP) published a white paper titled"Scotland's Future",outlining a comprehensive set of social welfare policies to be implemented post-independence, aimed at garnering voter support. Key welfare commitments included: reforming the pension system; abolishing the "bedroom tax" and Universal Credit; introducing education and child policy reforms. Additionally, the white paper proposed retaining the pound sterling as Scotland's currency, establishing a new broadcasting service, and raising tax subsidies and the minimum wage. The SNP clearly held the document in high regard. As reported by The Independent, Scotland's then-Deputy First Minister Nicola Sturgeon praised the white paper as "the most comprehensive blueprint for building an independent country ever produced" and "a landmark document".

1.2 Research Question

How Scottish social welfare policies shape and reflect national identity? Focusing on this core issue, this paper will explore the bidirectional relationship between Scottish welfare policies and identity construction by adopting a literature analysis and comparative research approach.

1.3 Research Significance

Research on the influence of social welfare policies on Scottish national identity still features noteworthy gaps worthy of further exploration, such as the lack of comparative studies with other devolved regions like England to identify the uniqueness of the Scottish model. Contemporary research on ethnic identity is undergoing a "welfare shift, whereby social welfare systems are not only tools for governments to provide public services, but also important mechanisms for shaping collective identity and reinforcing group boundaries. This shift is particularly prominent in multi-ethnic countries, because different ethnic groups often construct their collective identities through differentiated welfare policy. Scotland, as a highly autonomous ethnic region within the United Kingdom, offers a valuable case study illustrating how welfare policies can become a key factor in the construction of ethnic identity. This paper aims to systematically analyze the significant role of welfare policies in the construction of ethnic and national identity in Scotland, providing a comparative case study for identity research in other regions of the United Kingdom.

2. The Scottish Welfare State and National Identity

Esping-Andersen categorizes the main welfare systems of capitalism into three types: the liberal welfare model represented by the UK and US, the corporatist model typified by Germany, and the social democratic model exemplified by Sweden (Xiong Yuegen, 2019). Scotland has a unique position within this framework, with its policy practices leaning toward social democracy. For example, policies such as free menstrual products and child allowances align closely with the Swedish model, creating tension with the UK's overall liberal welfare system, such as the Universal Credit reform. Scotland aims to construct an image of a "progressive Scotland" through the "Nordicization" of its welfare policies, but its efforts are constrained by the UK's fiscal framework (such as the Barnett Formula), limiting the actual impact of these policies.

The existence of dual identity complicates Scotland's national identity issue. For Scots, the "political community consciousness" inherent in their ethnic identity is variable: before 1707, it referred to the Scottish nation, while after 1707, it shifted to Britain. This implies that Scottish ethnic identity is not necessarily equivalent to or homogeneous with a fixed national identity; the two can be separated and recombined. In fact, Scottish national identity is characterized by "strong ethnicity but weak statehood" (Hu Li, 2021). The contradiction between the diminishing trend in personal identity and the long-term absence of external threats from England essentially stems from the conflict between self-identity and actual position. When English people focus their attention on the national level, their identity shifts from national identity to ethnic identity (Yue Peng, 2015).

3. Implementation Status of Selected Welfare Policies in Scotland

Scotland currently administers 14 social security benefits, with 7 being newly established and exclusive to Scotland.

3.1 Education

3.1.1 Childcare Policy

Since 1998, Scotland has implemented a universal early childhood education policy for 4-year-olds, providing free educational services for 2.5 hours per day, 5 days a week. The UK government subsequently established phased development targets: By 2002, coverage was extended to all 3-year-olds in Scotland, while England achieved only two-thirds coverage at the same stage. By 2004, the policy was fully extended across all of England. Lowering the eligibility age for early childhood education services to 3-year-olds became a key direction in education policy during this period(Bertram & Pascal 2000).

Despite the broad coverage of childcare policies, structural imbalances between supply and demand have led to a significant shortage of childcare spots, forcing some families to wait months or even a year for an appointment, with the situation being even worse in rural areas. Critics point to fiscal sustainability concerns, arguing that certain policies (such as the expansion of free childcare) have not adequately accounted for costs, potentially squeezing budgets for other public services. There are also fairness concerns in the design of the system: wage-earning families benefit more, while non-working families (such as those reliant on welfare) still face income gaps, with their childcare subsidies covering only 53% of the costs associated with a socially acceptable standard of living, exposing systemic inadequacies in welfare adequacy.

3.1.2 Tuition-Free University Policy

Tuition fees for Scottish domestic students and students from EU member states pursuing their first degree in Scotland are covered by SAAS (an executive agency of the Scottish Government) for a total of five years (including four years of study and an additional year for course changes or repeat studies), while students from England and Wales are required to pay tuition fees of up to £9,000.

The university's tuition-free policy fully reflects the Scottish government's commitment to educational equity, enabling more Scottish students to access higher education regardless of their family's financial situation. However, a survey commissioned by The Sunday Times and conducted by YouGov found that 80% of respondents believe Scotland's tuition policy is "unfair". Additionally, 74% of respondents believe there should be a legal requirement ensuring that all UK students receive equal treatment. While the free university policy has been widely praised by the Scottish public, it has now placed significant financial pressure on Scotland. Scottish universities say they are facing the most challenging funding solutions in recent years, with teaching budgets for the 2024-2025 academic year reduced by nearly £30 million.

3.2 Healthcare Policy

The NHS system in Scotland was established in 1948. Through years of development, it has formed a relatively comprehensive three-tier service network:The first tier consists of primary care services, the second tier comprises regional medical institutions, the third tier includes university teaching hospitals. Scotland has 32 local governments. The NHS provides 85% of healthcare expenditure budgets, while the remaining 15% is covered by local governments through tax revenues. The NHS is organized into 14 regional boards responsible for delivering first- and second-tier medical services within their respective areas. The NHS headquarters oversees third-tier medical services, military and prison hospitals, as well as its own operations.

Scotland's universal healthcare system exhibits three main characteristics: First, it has extensive coverage, with over 70 years of operation ensuring all legal residents living in Scotland for more than six months enjoy comprehensive healthcare coverage. Second, it demonstrates outstanding service equity, with diagnosis and treatment based entirely on clinical needs rather than patients' social status or financial capability, truly implementing the concept of healthcare equality. Third, it has a well-developed referral system. This system identifies and triages the vast majority of health issues at the primary care level, leveraging the advantages of GPs (General Practitioners) in health education and prevention, while secondary and tertiary medical institutions not only perform their respective functions but also focus on redirecting patients back to primary care, forming a rational two-way flow cycle. Additionally, the system also faces some issues, such as low operational efficiency (Gu Xiangdong, 2020).

3.3 Social Aspects

3.3.1 Pension System

With the intensification of population aging, the pension issue has become a significant challenge faced by many countries and regions. How to establish a fair and sustainable pension system to ensure the quality of life for the elderly is an urgent problem to be solved. Scotland's pension system is primarily under the jurisdiction of the UK central government, but certain policies have been adjusted by the Scottish Government due to devolution. The following are introductions to several pension types.

State Pension: The latest state pension policy was implemented after April 6, 2016. Males born on or after April 6, 1951, and females born on or after April 6, 1953, can apply for a pension under the new state pension scheme. To qualify for a pension, individuals must reach the state pension age (currently being phased up to 67) and have at least 10 years of National Insurance (NI) contribution history. To receive a pension, applicants must have at least 10 years of NI contributions, referred to as "10 qualifying years". Those with over 35 years of NI contributions are eligible for a full pension. If an individual has less than 10 years of NI contributions at retirement, they are not eligible for a pension. The full weekly amount of the new State Pension, which came into effect after 2016, is approximately £221.20. The Scottish Government has no authority to directly alter the State Pension but can provide additional support through welfare supplements. For example, starting in winter 2023, Scotland will upgrade the original Winter Fuel Payment to the "Scottish Winter Heating Allowance" (Heating Payment), with those aged 65 and over eligible to receive a one-time payment of £200–300 without needing to apply. England continues to use the old system, requiring individuals to apply, and the amount remains the same regardless of age.

Workplace Pension: Occupational pensions are also known as workplace pensions. In simple terms, occupational pensions involve deducting a portion of an employee's salary and depositing it into their pension account (workplace pension scheme), while employers are also required to contribute a corresponding amount to the employee's account. Upon retirement, the employee can then withdraw the occupational pension. The funds in the workplace pension scheme remain under the employee's ownership, so the workplace pension account functions more like a personal bank account. However, employees cannot withdraw funds from the account until they reach a certain age (typically between 60 and 65, with the earliest age being 55). Employees aged 22 to the state pension age with an annual income exceeding £10,000 must be automatically enrolled by their employer. The Scottish Government and NHS Scotland continue to maintain the "Scottish Public Service Pension Scheme" (SPPS), providing DB benefits for approximately 550,000 public sector employees. Contribution rates and retirement factors differ slightly from the English public sector scheme (e.g., the normal retirement age after 2015 is the higher of the State Pension Age or 65). Local education, police, and other systems are fully funded by the Scottish Treasury and are not subject to annual adjustments by the UK Treasury, resulting in fewer strikes in recent years compared to England.

Personal Pension: The UK Personal Pension Scheme adopts a trust structure (DC type), with the scheme provider establishing a trustee plan to centrally manage the personal pension assets of scheme participants. The "lifetime pension allowance" was abolished in 2024, replaced by a "one-time tax-free allowance" with a cap of £268,275, with rules unified across the UK. Due to differences in income tax brackets between Scotland and England, high-income earners in Scotland actually receive slightly higher tax relief amounts. The Scottish Government provides additional funding for the "Money Talk Scotland" program, offering free private pension advice to low-income groups. A similar service in England is provided by MoneyHelper, but the brand and funding sources differ.

Although Scotland's pension policies are primarily set by the UK government, the Scottish government has reinforced the image of a "unique Scottish welfare system" through supplementary welfare measures and differentiated policies. This has a dual impact on national identity: policies such as free elderly care make Scottish citizens feel a sense of difference from England, reinforcing the perception that "Scotland is fairer and more caring towards the vulnerable"; Scotland has a higher proportion of pension recipients per capita, and public dissatisfaction with the UK government's freeze on pension increases (such as the suspension of the "triple lock") may translate into support for independence.

Pensions and lump sum payments made from 2019-20 to 2023-24 are shown in Figure 1.

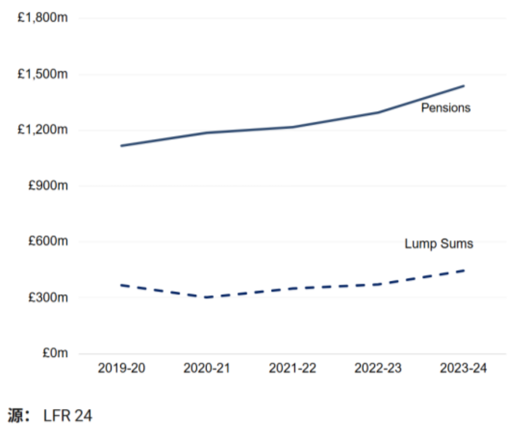

Figure 1. Pensions and lump sum payments made from 2019-20 to 2023-24

（Source of Data : The Scottish Government）

4. Comparison of Welfare Systems: Scotland vs. England

To make the research more persuasive, this section compares the implementation and impact of welfare policies in Scotland and England from the three aspects mentioned above.

Table 1. Comparison of Some Welfare Systems Between Scotland and England

	Scotland	England
Education	Local & EU Undergraduates: Fully government-subsidized, tuition fees at £0	Domestic & All UK Students: £9,250/year (higher for postgraduate programs)
NHS System	Prescription Medications: Free for all residents	Prescription Medications: £9.65 per item for adults
Pension	State Pension: Same amount as England (£221.20/week in 2024/25), but with synchronized eligibility age increases in the eligibility age	State Pension: Same amount and eligibility age

Free prescription drugs, free eye tests, and free personal care (for those aged 65 and over) remain available in Scotland, whereas these services have been cut or made fee-based in England. This disparity has made Scots acutely aware of the contrast between "London policy" and "Scottish reality", reinforcing the collective identity that "we Scots value equality and welfare more highly" .In Scotland, elderly individuals requiring care can access personal care services, whereas in England, such services are subject to a means test based on financial circumstances. Scotland introduced free National Health Service (NHS) vision and dental check-ups in 2006 and abolished prescription charges in 2011, measures that have not been implemented in England. Scotland abolished the pre-devolution healthcare internal market system as early as 2004, dissolving NHS trusts, but this system remains in place in England. Such policy differences may reflect—and may further fuel—stronger support among Scots for a universalist model (Butt, S et al. 2022). The combination of "free university + free prescriptions" allows Scots to directly feel the difference between Scotland and England in every payment scenario (or when no payment is required). The SNP packages these three welfare differences into the "Scottish social democratic model" to counter the "English neoliberal model", providing emotional mobilization resources for successive elections and independence referendums. Polls show that Scots consistently trust the Scottish government more than the UK government on healthcare and education issues, with the welfare system serving as evidence that "the Scottish government better represents our interests".

5. The Shaping Mechanism of Welfare Policies on Scottish National Identity

5.1 Policy Differentiation and Identity Boundary Construction

The Scottish Government, led by the Scottish National Party (SNP), has implemented a series of differentiated welfare policies to deliberately contrast with the Conservative Party's austerity measures in the UK: the previously mentioned free university education policy has demonstrated Scotland's strong sense of autonomy and independence, reducing its reliance on the UK central government. This economic independence has further weakened Scots' national identity with the United Kingdom, making them more inclined to perceive Scotland as an independent economic and social entity. The free university policy has strengthened Scots' sense of national identity and cohesion, making them more likely to see themselves as part of Scottish society. In sharp contrast to the high tuition fees paid by students in England and Wales, Scotland's free policy highlights the differences between Scotland and the rest of the UK in terms of welfare policies. This difference reinforces Scots' sense of "otherness", as Scots typically view "English" as "others".

5.2 Value Expression and Identity Connotation

Scotland has implemented policies to embody values such as "equality" and "solidarity". Its free education policy symbolizes "equal opportunity", contrasting with England's market-oriented education system. The universal child welfare policy reflects the principle that "children are the social responsibility of the whole society", rather than the burden of individual families. Scottish government reports frequently emphasize "reducing poverty". They provide a weekly Scottish Child Poverty Allowance (SCP) of £26.70, aiming to make Scotland "the most equal region in Europe". The Scottish government is also the first in the world to implement a government plan to end reliance on food banks, replacing charitable relief with a "cash-first" approach to strengthen the national responsibility. These policies, which pursue fairness, have further enhanced public national identity.

6. The Reverse Effect of National Identity on Welfare Policy Development

As the main nationalist party in Scotland, the Scottish National Party (SNP) has a policy agenda that is heavily influenced by the Scottish independence movement. Welfare policies can be used to strengthen voters' identification with the "Scottish national community." Scottish people's expectations for a "fairer society" limit the SNP's policy options; any welfare reforms that align with the British Conservative Party could be perceived as "betraying Scottish values." The SNP has raised the flag of "independence" and firmly committed to defending Scottish interests, which has increased public trust in the party and facilitated its strong rise. However, if voters believe the SNP cannot actually lead them to independence, it will be difficult to gain their support again (Li Xiaodan, 2022).

7. Conclusion

The Scottish government has shaped its citizens' unique national identity through welfare policies such as childcare, tuition-free universities, the NHS system, and pensions. Conversely, national identity also influences the Scottish government's policy-making. The policy differentiation between Scotland and England stems from the Scottish public's expectation of a "fairer society". However, Scotland's fiscal dependence on central government funding from the UK significantly limits its policy autonomy, which, over time, may also affect the Scottish public's sense of identity. The bidirectional interaction between welfare policies and national identity holds important implications for the governance of multi-ethnic nations.

References

[1] Bertram, T., & Pascal, C. (2000). OECD Country note: Early childhood education and care policy in the United Kingdom. *Worcester: Centre for Research in Early Childhood: University College Worcester.*

[2] Bogdanor, V. (2009). *The new British constitution*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

[3] Butt, S., Clery, E. & Curtice, J.(eds.). (2022). *British Social Attitudes: The 39th Report.* London: National Centre for Social Research.

[4] 顾向东.(2020).苏格兰医疗服务机构的建设与管理.中国医院建筑与装备,21(03),75-77.

[5] 胡莉.(2021).政党政治视野下苏格兰双重认同的变化与苏格兰分离态势的加剧.世界民族,(05),57-68.

[6] 李小丹.(2022).政党政治地区化的两条路径:以权力下放后的英国为例.当代世界与社会主义,(05),141-151.

[7] 王磊&曲兵.(2021).英国权力下放制度的运行困境——基于新冠疫情应对的视角.欧洲研究,39(06),138-154+8.

[8] 熊跃根.(2019).福利体制比较的类型学:源流与发展.江海学刊,(03),101-109+255.

[9] 岳鹏.(2015).苏格兰独立公投视角下的民族主义结构矛盾.欧洲研究,33(03),113-129+8.

[10] 赵丁.(2018).苏格兰财政改革:自治与权力下放.地方财政研究,(04),105-112.