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Scottish independence: 'Xenophobia' drives immigration policy, Russell says

Scotland's education secretary has claimed UK immigration policy is being "driven by UKIP and a nasty xenophobia".

Mike Russell said that since the coalition came to power, the number of students from India studying at Scottish universities has halved.

UK ministers said Mr Russell's comments were "outrageous".

They said the number of students studying in Scotland from China, Malaysia and other countries had risen.

Mr Russell's comments came ahead of his addresses to an education conference organised by the Economic and Social Research Council.

Scottish Secretary Alistair Carmichael was also due to speak at the event.

Mr Russell believes UK immigration policy is damaging Scotland's universities and their international reputation.

"The debate south of the border is being driven by UKIP and by a nasty xenophobia which certainly revolts me and I think revolts many others," he will say.

"The practical effect on higher education is two-fold.

"Figures published this month, from the [UK Higher Education Statistics Authority](#), show that since the coalition came to power, the number of students from India studying at Scottish universities has halved.

"In 2010-11 there were 3,290 students from India. The latest figures for 2012-13 show just 1,665.

"This is daft and self-defeating."

Mr Russell said his proposed "global excellence fund" to allow universities to attract international talent had come up against an immigration policy, "entirely focused on cutting numbers and measuring success by restriction and expulsion".

Ahead of his speech, he said: "When students are excluded, when genuine scholars are treated with suspicion, then the reputation of the UK, and by association Scotland, as a place to study is undermined."

The row came as Prime Minister David Cameron has been defending proposed immigration changes, saying they contain "sensible" measures aimed at lowering annual net migration.

But UKIP, which is seeking to challenge the Conservatives at the polls, has said leaving the EU was the only way to fully take control of Britain's borders.

At the same time, the Scottish government is urging people to vote "Yes" in the 18 September independence referendum.

Comments 'ridiculous'

SNP ministers have promised to protect free higher education for Scottish students in the event of independence, but opponents have argued that plans to charge tuition fees to students from the rest of the UK could break European law.

For the UK government, Scotland Office Minister David Mundell responded: "This is an outrageous comment from Mike Russell."

Mr Mundell said the remarks showed a "complete lack of understanding of immigration policy", adding: "First, there is no cap on numbers of foreign students at universities and no bar to EU students coming here to study.

"Second, the same figures he uses show that the number of students from China, the US, Malaysia, Canada, Norway, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong and Thailand studying in Scotland all rose in 2012-13."

Mr Mundell also said it was "ridiculous" of Mr Russell to talk about xenophobia when his own SNP government was looking to pursue a plan for tuition fees under Scottish independence which would be illegal under EU law, because it discriminated against students in the continuing UK because they were English, Welsh or Northern Irish.

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