
Scotland

Ministers debate education policies

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Alistair Carmichael said the union 'allows funding, ideas and people to flow unhindered across the UK in pursuit of research excellence'

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The free flow of people and ideas for education and research will be scrutinised today as Scottish and UK ministers debate the risks and opportunities of independence.

Scottish Secretary Alistair Carmichael said the union "allows funding, ideas and people to flow unhindered across the UK in pursuit of research excellence".

But Scottish Government Education Secretary Mike Russell said the UK's "xenophobic" immigration policy, driven by the UK Independence Party (Ukip), undermines Scottish education and research, and damages the UK's international reputation.

Both men will address an Economic and Social Research Council conference entitled

Higher Education, the Devolution Settlement and the Referendum on Independence today.

Speaking ahead of the conference, Mr Carmichael said: "The highly integrated research environment that our universities and higher education institutions can operate within ensures a coherent and strategic approach to research activity in a common research area.

"It allows funding, ideas and people to flow unhindered across the UK in pursuit of research excellence.

"So, the questions we need to ask ourselves are: Could an independent Scottish state maintain the level of research quality excellence currently enjoyed by Scottish higher education institutions as part of the UK? What evidence is there that independence would improve the performance of our institutions?"

He added: "According to the Scottish Government, we'll have a common research area between an independent Scotland and the continuing UK.

"Sounds a lot like what we have right now except, of course, for one vital distinction: national governments fund national research.

"There is no international precedent for sharing or replicating a system on the scale of the current UK funding streams across international borders.

"Why would a state that we had just chosen to leave want to carry on sharing institutions, funding expertise in the same way that we do now because we are part of it?"

"The Scottish Government want people to believe they have a vision, in fact what they proffer is a mirage.

"And like all mirages, the closer you get, the less real it becomes. In research - as in so many other areas - there can be no guarantees."

Mr Russell said: "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.

"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. This is daft and self-defeating."

He added: "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.

"It is essential that Scotland is able to set our own policies on migration and citizenship.

"Scotland needs to be seen as a welcoming place, open for academic and research business and more than willing to see those of talent staying if they wish to build lives and careers . That cannot happen without independence."

Responding to the Education Secretary's comments, Scotland Office Minister David Mundell said: "This is an outrageous comment from Mike Russell.

"It shows a complete lack of understanding of immigration policy. 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.

"Finally, it is simply ridiculous of him to talk about xenophobia when his own government talks about pursuing a plan for tuition fees if Scotland chose to leave the UK which would be illegal under EU law as it discriminates against students in the continuing UK simply on the basis they are English, Welsh or Northern Irish."

On the issue of research quality in an independent Scotland, a Scottish Government spokesman said: "Of course Scotland's world success in research will continue and flourish under independence. World-class research, which Scotland is renowned for, already operates across boundaries, be they disciplinary, institutional or geographical.

"An independent Scotland, and the new opportunities that would bring in terms of full control of economic powers including border controls, would ensure the sector will continue to attract valuable investment, research funding and students from around the globe."

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