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'UK immigration policy revolts me' - Mike Russell



by CHRIS MARSHALL

THE UK'S immigration policy is "driven by Ukip and nasty xenophobia", Scotland's education secretary will claim today.

Mike Russell is expected to tell a higher education conference in Edinburgh that he is "revolted" by the immigration debate south of the Border, which he claims is putting foreign students off coming to [Scotland](#).

Figures published earlier this month by the Higher Education Statistics Authority showed the number of Indian students studying in Scotland has halved since the coalition came to power.

Mr Russell said the UK's immigration policy was not only damaging Scotland's universities, but the country's reputation internationally. And he said it was undermining the Global Excellence [Fund](#), an initiative set up by the Scottish Government to promote international research by universities.

He is expected to say: "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.

"I proposed the Global Excellence Fund to allow all universities to invest in global talent.

"But they are up against an immigration policy entirely foc-used on cutting numbers and measuring success by restriction and expulsion.

"The second problem arises from the effects of the first. 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."

Mr Russell said figures revealing the number of Indian students in Scotland had fallen from 3,290 in 2010-11 to 1,665 in 2012-13 showed the UK immigration policy was "daft and self-defeating".

But the education secretary's political opponents accused him of using "intemperate" language to deflect attention from the Scottish Government's position on tuition fees.

The Conservative Scotland Office minister David Mundell, said: "This is an outrageous comment.

"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."

Labour's deputy education spokesman Neil Bibby added: "There is absolutely no place for these intemperate comments when people are coming together to discuss issues as important as Scottish education.

"This is hypocrisy from a man who decides whether he will charge tuition fees based on nationality."

In recent weeks, a number of legal experts have questioned the SNP's assertion that UK students could continue to be charged tuition fees of up to £9,000 a year should Scots vote for independence later this year.

Under the current system, Scots and EU students have their tuition paid for by the Scottish Government, while those from England, Northern Ireland and Wales must pay their own way.

Fears have been raised that, under independence, Scotland would be flooded by "fee refugees" because UK students would be entitled to free tuition, as they would then be classed as citizens of other EU countries.

Last year, the body representing university principals, Universities Scotland, said the dramatic drop in the number of Indian students was a direct result of UK government policies and Westminster's tough talk on immigration.

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