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Russell in 'fee refugees' claim



Robbie Dinwoodie
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Correspondent

Thursday 30 January 2014

EDUCATION Secretary Michael Russell has mounted his strongest defence yet for charging English students to come to Scotland, claiming 80% of university places could be filled by "fee refugees" without that action.

Laying the blame squarely on the Westminster decision to levy tuition fees in the rest of the UK, Mr Russell argued that the EU would accept the validity of Scotland's case for continuing to charge tuition fees to students from south of the border in the event of a Yes vote.

Speaking at an education conference in Edinburgh yesterday, he said Scotland's case was a "truly unique" one, adding: "Presently, only 1.5% of students domiciled in the rest of the UK study in Scotland. If that total were to rise to 10%, and scoping of the issue suggests the number might go higher, then 80% of existing university places in Scotland would be filled by those students."

He said the EU would recognise the impossibility of such an flow of "fee refugees" for the Scottish system, with a rise in incoming numbers from 14,300 to more than 90,000.

He added: "Right now, around 88% of Scottish students remain in Scotland to work after graduation so the numbers of Scottish graduates available to Scottish employers would fall dramatically and would not be adequately replaced by the 36% of graduates from the rest of the UK or Europe who stay on after studying in Scotland.

"There are strong reasons why this policy is the right one. It is a policy we pursue now an SNP Scottish Government will pursue after independence in defence of Scottish Higher Education, its excellence and its students."

Mr Russell also maintained his attack on UK immigration policy, insisting: "The debate south of the border is being driven by UKIP and by - I must use a word used by amongst others, Professor Quintin McKellar, Vice Chancellor of the University of Hertfordshire - a nasty 'xenophobia' which certainly revolts me and I think revolts many others."

He added: "To find yourself defined by what other people want to do all the time is simply wrong. I do not believe, to be blunt, that a country that has vans that go about saying to people 'go home' is a country operating a policy that I can support."

Scottish Secretary Alistair Carmichael, who was also at the event, accused Mr Russell of attempting the "oldest trick in the book" by trying to "distract attention with a synthetic spat" to divert attention from his case on Scotland's future position within the existing "common research area," in which the funding institutions and formulae continued.

He mocked the idea that Scotland would choose to leave the UK family, charge English students tuition fees, and then expect to maintain its current status for university research and funding purposes.

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

The Scottish Secretary faced a tough reception from the audience at the seminar, organised by the Future of the UK and Scotland project at Edinburgh University.

The first question said that in contrast to the vision laid out by Mr Russell, Mr Carmichael had offered a

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"disappointing 25 minutes of negativity," while a second questioner tried to hold him to account for decisions South of the Border on student loans and tuition fees.

Mr Carmichael said he "took the comments on the chin" but insisted he had a duty to highlight how well the current settlement was working and expose the shortcomings in the assertions laid out by the Scottish Government.

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Peter Moseley · 12 hours ago
"He mocked the idea that Scotland would choose to leave the UK family, charge English students tuition fees, and then expect to maintain its current status for university research and funding purposes."

wee alex's party's bribe to Scottish students to vote yes would only last a short time after the unlikely event of independence in the face of a fiscal black hole that would open up. Scottish universities would be underfunded over the long term and gradually lose their competitive edge, even if the EU broke it's own rules by allowing an iScotland to go it's own way. Why should the EU break its own rules for a tiny proportion of its population that is applying for membership?

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Alan O'Brien, Cumbernauld · 10 hours ago
Need to say I usually see these, Scottish v British issues in very black and white terms. However, this is a very, very difficult one. The Scottish Government is attempting to do what it feels is right for Scotland's higher education system and to help attract potential high quality new Scots.

However, the big country next door has some of the most draconian levels of higher education fees in Europe. If access to the Scottish education system is granted to the victims of London's prohibitive policies then the Scottish system won't be sustainable.

This leads to the paradox where a government trying to attract new Scots feels it has no choice but to exclude "fee refugees" who are likely to want to utilise Scottish higher education. The paradox of course being that we do want to attract students who we hope would make their lives here.

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It will be very interesting to see how the EU rules on this very challenging situation. Wouldn't it be ironic if the organisation detested by UKIP style British nationalists actually supported their view? :-P

This of course, also presents a gift wrapped opportunity for the more rabid member of the British nationalist groupings to make accusations of anti English racism....ironic when Mike Russell himself is an Englishman.

However, I would correct one of Mike Russell's comments. "Nasty Xenophobia" isn't a word, it's two words. Two very accurate ones when it comes to describing the direction this London based government is moving in.

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Dr Douglas McKenzie · 8 hours ago

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

Mr Carmichael seems curiously unaware of the EU's Framework Programme that covers international joint research between the member states and other (non EU) participating states. The budget for 2014-2020 is 80 billion Euros. This dwarves UK spending.

Mr Carmichael also appears unaware of more modest international collaborations such as that currently being operated between the UK and Norway and funded through the Technology Strategy Board. Major UK research charities such as the Wellcome Trust already fund research in the Republic of Ireland as well as in the UK.

It is not surprising that Mr Carmichael had a difficult reception: intelligent people don't like being patronised by politicians making statements that are clearly for public point scoring rather than discussing what will happen in higher education upon independence.

At the current rate of scare story refutation I give this one till March before there is an announcement on joint research funding arrangements.

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Alasdair Galloway → Dr Douglas McKenzie · 7 hours ago

Mr Carmichael's awareness extends only as far as it is convenient for the argument that he is putting forward at the time, a weakness he seems to share with many members of the Westminster Cabinet who come up to Scotland to tell us why it would be better to vote No. Think of the used car salesman who misses out that the beautifully presented car he is putting in front of you has a hole in its floor.

You are dead right about the Framework Programme, but there are also other specific EU funded research opportunities. Moreover these will not only be opportunities for collaboration across the EU, but actually demand that the research is done collaboratively across the EU - ie a UK institution must have at least one partner in another EU state.

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