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Scottish independence



Scottish universities won't be swamped by English students, says study

Edinburgh university study claims little evidence 'fee refugees' would flood north if free tuition policy extended to rest of UK

Severin Carrell, Scotland correspondent
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Edinburgh University students: Scotland has the highest proportion of EU students of any part of the UK.
Photograph: Murdo Macleod

Claims by Scottish government ministers that Scotland's universities will be "swamped" by English students seeking free tuition after independence have been challenged by an expert study.

The analysis by academics at the University of Edinburgh says there is little evidence that up to 70,000 "fee refugees" would flood north if Scotland was forced to extend free tuition to everyone living in the UK.

The European commission has already warned Alex Salmond's government in Edinburgh it would be illegal to continue excluding all other UK residents from claiming free tuition fees if Scotland votes for independence in September's referendum.

Critics of the strategy claim that means that free tuition – one of Salmond's flagship policies – would be unaffordable after independence.

Mike Russell, the Scottish education secretary, has insisted the policy would be legal under a little-used EU rule that allows member states in rare circumstances to introduce discriminatory policies to protect their country's social fabric or economy.

Russell has claimed that Scottish institutions would be "swamped" by up to 93,000 students from across the UK if they were allowed free tuition – a near fivefold increase over the 20,000 currently from England, Wales and Northern Ireland. That would justify continuing to exclude UK students from the policy, he argues.

Scotland is currently allowed to use its devolved powers to charge students from other parts of the UK up to £9,000 a year for tuition because that does not discriminate against citizens of another member state.

The Edinburgh study, led by Professor Sheila Riddell from Edinburgh University's school of education, suggests "rUK" students from the rest of the UK should pay up to £170m a year to study in Scotland. Scottish universities must give all other EU students free tuition under EU equal access rules. That has left Scotland with the highest proportion of EU students of any part of the UK, costing the Scottish government roughly £150m a year.

Riddell's study found that based on a detailed analysis of student movements and interviewing nearly 200 academics, administrators and students from around the UK, there would only be a modest increase in the number of UK students after independence.

There were other barriers such as living costs, travel costs, the extra year of study in Scotland and distance from home that would be disincentives, it found. The study also found that Scotland would need more non-Scottish students to make up for a demographic shortfall in the number of Scottish teenagers until 2023.

Riddell said there was widespread scepticism about Russell's policy. "The Scottish government has been very confident that it will be able to charge rUK students, but the general view among policymakers and those with a civil service background is that it is highly unlikely to be possible," she said.

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