

The Queen's Speech

The first Queen's speech of the coalition government is ambitious in that it sets out 22 bills to be covered in 18 months. A number of the bills cover manifesto commitments from the coalition parties to do such things as scrap ID cards, reverse the rise in national insurance and 'reform' parliament.

You can find the entirety of the speech here:

Mentions of FE and HE were thin on the ground (i.e. not mentioned at all) but there are a number of measures that will have an impact on education and on public services in general. The academies bill we can see as a precursor as to how the coalition will pursue a more marketised, business driven agenda within all public services and FE will certainly be fairly high on the list.

Academies Bill

The Academies Bill is being promoted as a flagship piece of legislation which will enshrine the new coalition government's policies on education. It will allow more schools to become academies which will 'free' schools from state control. Each new academy will qualify as a charity.

Ministers believe that 'setting rules in Whitehall' is not the way to raise standards in classrooms.

It is possible that this bill will see the immediate introduction of the much-anticipated 'free schools' drive which will allow different groups, including parents and businesses, to start and run state schools.

The coalition wants to see the academies legislation enacted in time for the new school year in September.

The education unions and the Anti-Academies Alliance will oppose this legislation. UCU will offer support to sister unions and to the AAA to which we are affiliated.

The Education and Children's Bill

This bill deals less with the setting up and funding of schools than with the curriculum, internal workings of schools and discipline.

The government state that the main aims of this bill are:

- To give all schools greater freedom over the curriculum
- To improve school accountability
- To take action to tackle bureaucracy
- To improve behaviour in schools

This bill will also include 'reform' of Ofsted and reduce requirements under the national curriculum.

It will also include the Lib Dem-backed 'pupil premium' which would see more money being spent on children from a disadvantaged background, as well as focusing on early years learning. How this would work has not been unveiled in detail but it is anticipated that the money will 'move' with the pupil to whatever school they are attending.

UCU will again support sister unions in their opposition to free schools – like academies they would take schools out of local authority control. There is very little detail available about how such a school would be set up and how it would work in practice.

Further and higher education were not addressed by specific bills but the review on HE funding is in the pipeline to report in the early autumn, so heading our way very soon. It is possible aspects of FE will fall into other proposed bills but we may not know this until the detail of the bill is published. We will keep you posted.

Public Bodies Bill

An assault on quangos is likely to be a key feature of efforts by the new government to find billions of pounds of 'efficiency savings' across Whitehall. The drive was promised by the Conservatives in opposition but, significantly, has been handed to Nick Clegg and his team at the Cabinet Office.

It has already been announced that the QCDA will be scrapped; a number of other organisations could fall under the axe via this legislation. This could have an impact on UCU members depending on which bodies are dismantled and where their oversight will be passed to.

Right to request flexible working

The right to request flexible working currently applies to employed parents with children under the age of 16, parents of disabled children up to the age of 18, and carers of certain adults. This will now be extended to include all of those in employment. This goes alongside a commitment to tackle the gender pay gap.