

UCU briefing on the Queen's Speech 2016

This year's Queen's Speech sets out plans for several new pieces of legislation in 2016/17 which directly affect post-school education and which UCU will be following closely.

They include a higher education and research bill which will open up the sector to alternative providers, a prison reform bill with an emphasis on prison education and rehabilitation, and an education bill which, as well as changes to teacher training, will include further details of the forthcoming skills plan.

The union has said that the key to quality education at all levels was ensuring a professional and well rewarded workforce and making careers in teaching more attractive to the brightest graduates.

In response to the Queen's Speech, UCU general secretary, Sally Hunt, said: 'We will be looking at the detail of the proposed legislation, especially the first higher education legislation in over a decade. We are disappointed that the government is continuing on a clear course to privatise higher education despite the very real danger which this poses to our sector's international reputation.

'We are convinced that the best way to improve education quality at all levels is to listen to the concerns of teaching staff, and focus on ensuring a professional and well-rewarded workforce.'

Key legislation for the post-school education sector in the 2016/17 Queen's Speech:

- **Higher Education and Research Bill**
- **Counter-Extremism and Safeguarding Bill**
- **Education for All Bill**
- **Prison and Courts Reform Bill**

Higher Education and Research Bill (England only, other than UK wide Research Council funding)

Following the recent publication of the Higher Education white paper, the first piece of legislation on higher education for over a decade outlines the ways in which the government plans to further commercialise the higher education sector by promoting 'choice and competition'.

It will be made simpler, quicker and easier for new institutions to set up, award degrees and gain university status. As part of the push to improve teaching quality, the government plan to introduce a Teaching Excellence Framework to 'drive up standards of teaching in all universities and give students clear information about where teaching is best and what benefits they can expect to gain from their course'.

Universities will be required to publish detailed information about application, offer and progression rates broken down by ethnicity, gender and socio-economic background.

On research the government says the will 'make sure the UK research and innovation system is sufficiently strategic and agile to meet future challenges, and would deliver national capability that drives discovery and growth. For the first time we would provide legal protection for the dual support system in England'

UCU response: UCU is deeply concerned by the government's move to further privatise higher education and allow faster degree-awarding powers to unproven providers; this poses a serious risk to staff and students. On teaching quality, we are deeply sceptical about the efficacy of proposed metrics for measuring quality, and believe that the best way to improve quality is to ensure that staff are secure and well-supported in their jobs. In relation to access, UCU has welcomed the extra reporting requirements but has called for stronger action on universities missing access targets and a review of the current unfair university admissions system.

Counter-Extremism and Safeguarding Bill (England and Wales only)

Following on from the controversial Counter-Terrorism and Security Act, which saw universities and colleges given statutory responsibilities under the prevent duty, the government is continuing with its anti-extremism drive by introducing legislation that it says aims to 'prevent radicalisation, tackle extremism in all its forms, and to promote community integration'.

The bill will include the introduction of new civil order regime to restrict what is referred to as 'extremist activity' and a consultation on new powers to intervene where councils are deemed to be failing to tackle extremism. In education there will be powers to intervene in 'unregulated education settings' and more powers for the Disclosure and Barring Service in an effort to ensure unsuitable people are unable to work with the vulnerable, including children.

UCU response: Following vocal opposition to the prevent duty in the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act, UCU will be working to ensure any legislation as part of the government's anti-extremism agenda does not unduly impact on democratic rights and freedom of speech.

Education for All Bill (England only)

The government is pushing on with its school reforms, despite being forced to reign in its plans to force all schools to become academies, something which is now a long term goal rather than a formal policy.

It will still be made easier for schools to convert to academies and powers will be introduced to force underperforming schools to do so. Responsibility for improvements in schools will move away from local authorities and shift to head teachers at a local level. More information is expected on a skills plan but the government have confirmed plans to reform 'technical education through a strong employer-led system with high quality qualifications which support a clear line of sight to skilled employment'

UCU response: UCU remains concerned about the government's direction of travel on academisation. We are also concerned by the proposed changes to teacher training and qualified teacher status, which will undermine the role of universities in delivering teacher education and have serious consequences for wider professional status of teaching staff, not least those in FE colleges. We eagerly await the government's skills plan but are anxious about any plans to further entrench the divide between academic and vocational learning.

Prison and Courts Reform Bill (England and Wales only)

The government has announced widespread reform to the prison system, including far more autonomy for governors and the building of new prisons to drive 'a revolution in education training, healthcare and security'.

These Reform Prisons would be led by governors with the power to enter into contracts and establish their own boards. Prisons will be required to produce statistics on prison education, reoffending and employment on release.

UCU response: Whilst welcoming the focus on education as the key to successful rehabilitation, we are clear that without more investment in prison education, strong quality controls and action to address the pay gap between prison educators and other further education staff, the proposed reforms may fail to make a real impact.

Other legislation

In addition to the bills outlined above, the government announced plans to bring forward proposals for a *Bill of Rights* and reforms to the Human Rights Act, although this is still very much at a consultative stage with further proposals expected in due course. The *Local Growth and Jobs Bill* will continue the devolution agenda to give further powers and budgets, including those for skills, to a local areas. A *Pensions Bill* will create a new guidance body bringing together the Pensions Advisory Service, Pension Wise and the pension services offered by the Money Advice Service.