

Potential causes of differential outcomes by ethnicity in legal professional assessments

3 June 2024

Research summary



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Background

There is a widely acknowledged and long-standing difference in legal qualification outcomes by ethnicity. Our annual education and training [monitoring reports \[sra/how-we-work/archive/reports/education-training-authorisation-monitoring-activity/\]](https://www.sra.org.uk/work/archive/reports/education-training-authorisation-monitoring-activity/) show this difference and it is also evident in other sectors, countries and stages of education.

To investigate this further, we commissioned the University of Exeter to:

- look at what causes these different outcomes
- increase our understanding about the factors that are driving these differences
- identify ways to help to improve outcomes for all students.

The legal assessments considered in this research were those that pre-date the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE), such as the Legal Practice Course (LPC) and the Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL).

However, not unexpectedly, we are also seeing a difference in outcomes in the SQE, and we are monitoring this by diversity characteristics. Our quality assurance processes include reviewing how we make sure that the examination itself is fair and free from bias, and we have a detailed [evaluation programme for the SQE \[sra/research-publications/evaluating-sqe/\]](https://www.sra.org.uk/research-publications/evaluating-sqe/). We will take on board the findings from this research as we continue with our evaluation programme.

The research

The interdisciplinary study was carried out by the University of Exeter, with academics from law, business and psychology. The research team used a wide range of methods to maximise the validity and robustness of the findings, including:

- A thorough [literature review \[sra/research-publications/ethnicity-attainment-gap-legal-professional-assessments/\]](https://sra/research-publications/ethnicity-attainment-gap-legal-professional-assessments/), which was published in June 2023. This identified some gaps in past research and informed the rest of the project, which importantly captured the experiences of those most affected.
- More than 1,200 survey responses from law degree and LPC students.
- 59 interviews with:
 - law students and recently qualified solicitors
 - educators teaching law degrees and professional qualifications
 - those holding senior positions in law firms, or working with law firms, most of whom were solicitors.
- Analysis of data on education outcomes:
 - at different stages of schooling into university
 - in other professions.
- Engagement with an external reference group with a broad range of expertise, including voices of those with lived experience.

Key findings

This is a complex issue and, as expected, the research team did not find a simple or single cause or solution to the issue. Most past research focused only on one aspect of the potential causes but we were determined to explore all the relevant factors and understand how they overlapped and affected candidates through their legal education and journey into the profession.

The findings have confirmed the complexity and breadth of the potential causes that were identified through the literature review. The research also provides evidence of how potential causes combine to impact education outcomes (including in legal professional assessments).

The research report highlights a wide range of possible ways to address the differential outcomes for minority ethnic students. Including many ongoing initiatives that we and others can learn from.

An overview of the findings by theme are set out below.

Social and economic background

- Students' socioeconomic background affects their early education options and experiences. Those who achieved better education outcomes tended to be from families with the financial resources and time to support their studies as well as knowledge of the education system and professional requirements.
- The literature review found that being part of a minority group increased the likelihood of experiencing discrimination and bias. This research then found that minority ethnic students have often experienced racism and teachers' low expectations of their capabilities. These students had developed coping strategies to deal with this, which can take energy away from studying.
- These experiences and resources impact students' confidence, self-esteem and exam preparedness, eg respondents from independent schools had higher confidence and more opportunities to practise exam skills.

School and university outcomes

- The Department for Education's data show that differential education outcomes can be seen early, particularly for Black pupils taking A-levels.
- These patterns can also be seen for all minority ethnic groups at university with 60% of Black students and 70% of Asian students achieving a first or upper second-class (2.1) degree, compared to 79% of White students.
- This research found that those who achieved better professional education outcomes tended to have fewer challenges in education before university. Such experiences were influenced by factors including location, peers and the support received from teachers.



Fitting in and support

- Students' confidence, the support they receive and how much they feel that they belong or fit has a significant effect on their outcomes.
- Lack of representation and diversity of staff and curriculum in legal education can impact students' feeling of belonging and/or that they 'fit' within law.
- It can also lead to microaggressions and bias in the classroom from academic staff, impacting minority ethnic students' learning.
- The interviews showed that the large student numbers in many law schools impacts how well educators know their students and their names, and their capacity to provide support where needed.

Access to legal work experience

- Having legal work or training opportunities, and/or paid education sponsorship, eases students' financial pressures and provides a support network and networking opportunities. All of these were found to benefit students' confidence and self-belief which, in turn, impacts their outcomes.
- The research showed that while 24% of Asian and 26% of Black LPC students' employers paid for their course, it was 45% for White LPC students. The interviews found that getting legal work or paid training is currently an easier process for those already with contacts in the profession.
- Recruitment processes that rely on A-level results, without looking at the context in which students received those grades (such as the school attended and their personal circumstances), were more likely to lead to White students being recruited. This was evident in the literature review and interviews and was found to perpetuate the status quo of diversity and representation in the profession and in education outcomes.
- The research showed 43% of Asian and 45% of Black LPC students had a legal role secured for when they completed their LPC, compared with 66% of White students.

Collective responsibility

- Collaborative action is needed to address differential outcomes.
- Law firms, education providers, representative groups and individual academics are implementing individual initiatives that are helping small numbers of students. However, the impact is limited because all are working at small-scale and/or in isolation.
- Some initiatives working well include making classroom environments more inclusive, having more professional role models, using contextual recruitment and having alternative routes through legal education and for work experiences, such as apprenticeships.

Suggested actions and discussion points

Collaboration is a key element in improving future education outcomes, as the complexity of the causes cannot be remedied by one set of actions or one set of stakeholders. The actions noted in the report are therefore a useful set of discussion points for stakeholders to consider when deciding what they should do.

These actions focus on areas where there is the potential to improve factors such as representation, feelings of fit and belonging, and the support available to minority ethnic students and exam candidates.

When deciding what to do, it is important to:

- avoid blanket assumptions about minority ethnic individuals and their circumstances
- consider the specific needs of the groups or individuals being supported and empowered.

As highlighted in the report, some existing initiatives implemented by the stakeholder groups are already taking forward many of these ideas. We can all learn from the experiences of those who delivered and/or participated in these initiatives.

The research also provided recommendations for specific groups or organisations:

Legal education providers

Providers can learn from their own and/or others' existing actions and go further to:

1. Increase understanding of the need and ways to support minority ethnic students.
2. Ensure greater diversity among teaching staff, senior leadership and decision-makers.
3. Ensure that senior management at educational institutions take responsibility for reducing differential outcomes.
4. Provide more resources for practical help to increase academic skills, such as assessment preparation.
5. Enable greater collaboration with law firms for paid work experience opportunities, practical help with lawyer skills, including soft skills, networking, and cultural capital.

Law firms

Firms can learn from their own and/or others' existing actions and go further to:

1. Have safe spaces and inclusive cultures for all staff and trainees.
2. Use contextual recruitment, especially for roles involving funded preparatory courses for legal professional assessments.
3. Measure recruitment and retention performance against appropriate diversity targets for all levels.
4. Provide focused mentorship and sponsorship to minority ethnic staff and trainees.

The SRA

The SRA can continue and expand activity in:

1. Playing a leading role as a change agent in progressing diversity across the profession, eg showcasing good practice and convening stakeholders.
2. Monitoring diversity data and initiatives across the profession and education.
3. Sharing relevant diversity research with stakeholders to support evidence-based practice.
4. Providing information about qualifying as a solicitor.
5. Increasing the SRA's ethnic diversity at leadership levels.

The sector

Overall, we can all consider whether and how to:

1. Improve regulation of professional legal education: ie by changing the regulatory remits so that there is more scope for the SRA's involvement in educational matters.
2. Improve access to and quality of legal career advice, including on the accessibility of legal careers – eg multiple routes into the profession.
3. Regular reviews of policies and practices.

Next steps

We will develop and finalise a collaborative action plan that is informed by the research findings and by working with others across the sector.

We will also invite people and organisations to reflect on and share views on the research before agreeing a collective way forward. To achieve this, we plan to bring together law firms, education providers and representative groups later this year to agree how we can work together to address the issues identified in the report.

We note the importance of representation, assessment preparation and the value of paid work experience and networking opportunities. Therefore, our action plan will likely include updating and more widely publicising our:

- [law firm diversity data tool](#) [[/solicitors/resources-archived/diversity-toolkit/law-firm-diversity-tool/](#)], so that the current diversity of the profession is more visible to those in education and the profession
- [information about qualifying as a solicitor](#) [[/become-solicitor/admission/pathways-qualification/](#)]
- [apprenticeship](#) [[/become-solicitor/sqe/solicitor-apprenticeships/](#)] information for aspiring solicitors and employers
- SQE [assessment information](#) [[https://sqe.sra.org.uk/exam-arrangements/assessment-information](#)] which includes the assessment specification and sample questions for both SQE1 and SQE2. Along with information on [what to expect on the assessment days](#) [[https://sqe.sra.org.uk/exam-](#)



[arrangements/the-assessment-day/](#) and how to [get a range of help and support](#) [\[https://sqe.sra.org.uk/help/\]](https://sqe.sra.org.uk/help/).

Our Corporate Strategy for 2023-26 highlights that one of our aims for the SQE is to open up access to the profession to aspiring solicitors from every background. Findings from this will help inform our [SQE evaluation programme](#) [\[sra/research-publications/evaluating-sqe/\]](#), phase three of which is starting this year.

We publish the [SQE results data](#) [\[https://sqe.sra.org.uk/exam-arrangements/sqe-reports/\]](https://sqe.sra.org.uk/exam-arrangements/sqe-reports/). In due course, our SQE data collection (and publication) will allow us and others to examine a larger body of data, across a single assessment that is centrally marked. Over time, this will allow us to develop a more nuanced understanding about the results by various diversity characteristics.

And we will progress [our action plan to significantly improve ethnic diversity](#) [\[sra/research-publications/ethnicity-inclusion/\]](#) at senior levels in the SRA.

Full research report and findings (University of Exeter)

[Open all](#) [\[#\]](#)

[Executive summary](#)

Background and aims

Introduced in September 2021, the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) is a single, rigorous assessment for qualifying solicitors in England and Wales. The Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) oversees the SQE, setting its structure, content and regulatory requirements. Kaplan has been appointed as the sole approved assessment provider, responsible for the delivery and administration of the SQE examinations. The assessment consists of two parts: SQE1, which tests candidates' application of functioning legal knowledge, and SQE2, which tests their practical legal skills and the application of legal knowledge.

The objectives of the SQE reforms are to provide:

1. greater assurance of consistent high standards at the point of admission as a solicitor
2. new and diverse pathways to qualifying as a solicitor which:
 - respond to the changing legal services market
 - promote a diverse profession by removing artificial and unjustifiable barriers.

The SQE replaced the old system of qualification of the Legal Practice Course (LPC) route where a range of SRA approved training providers assessed who passed the qualification. This route required aspiring solicitors to complete a fixed two-year period of recognised training with a single employer in a structured, sequential programme. The SQE reforms introduced qualifying work experience (QWE) to replace this, which allows candidates to fulfil work experience requirements and gain practical experience with greater flexibility. This enables a broader range of roles and settings to count towards qualification.

Evaluation overview

This report presents findings from the Phase 3 evaluation of the SQE, which was commissioned by the SRA in 2024. This is the first full independent review of stakeholder perspectives of the reforms, providing initial insights into early outcomes.

This evaluation forms a key part of the SRA's [10-year evaluation programme](#) [\[sra/research-publications/evaluating-sqe/\]](#) to understand the impact and effectiveness of the reforms. This third phase of the evaluation aims to collect views on whether the SQE reforms are progressing as intended towards their objectives. While recognising that the broader goals of the reforms are not expected to have been fully realised at this early stage.

The findings from this evaluation will guide the ongoing implementation of the reforms. The technical components of the assessments, such as their design, structure, and length, were not in scope for this evaluation. These will be examined in the next phase of the evaluation programme.

The views of more than 2,000 stakeholders were collected using the following methods:



- **Candidate survey and interviews:** Online survey with 1,868 SQE candidates (who sat the exam between September 2023 and July 2024) and 30 qualitative virtual interviews in February–March 2025.
- **Employer survey and focus groups:** Telephone survey with 447 employers in early 2025 and two focus groups in March 2025 with 14 participants.
- **Training provider survey and interviews:** Survey of training providers with 28 responses and nine qualitative interviews in early 2025.
- **Other stakeholder interviews:** Six qualitative interviews in early 2025 with organisations supporting diversity and professional development in law.

Where possible, the views of candidates and legal employers were compared to previous research on stakeholder perspectives of the reforms conducted by the SRA in 2022 and 2023.

Considerations of the research limitations should be taken into account when interpreting these findings.

This report discusses findings on views in relation to the original two objectives of the SQE reforms and the intended outcomes, providing a structured analysis of stakeholder perspectives on progress towards these goals.

This summary provides an overall assessment of views on the progress of the SQE towards its goals before focusing on four key themes:

- the development of the SQE training market
- the costs of qualifying as a solicitor
- experiences of QWE
- confidence in the SQE reforms.

Overall assessment

The SQE training market has developed as intended, enabling aspiring solicitors to choose from a wide range of flexible training options, at a variety of price points. Despite this, the evaluation found a mix of perspectives on whether the reforms are meeting their intended objectives. Legal employers were positive about the SQE reforms meeting their objectives, praising the flexibility the SQE provides. However, most candidates felt the objectives of the SQE reforms are not currently being met. In particular, candidates expressed negative views and experiences about the costs of qualifying as a solicitor. This is despite the costs of qualification under the SQE not exceeding those of the LPC for many candidates.

All stakeholder groups were not only positive about the increased availability of QWE but also expressed favourable views regarding its effectiveness in practice. There was broad recognition that the flexibility of QWE enables candidates to shape their experiences, undertake placements across a range of legal environments, and develop essential skills beyond traditional settings. This adaptability was regarded as supporting a more inclusive and diverse pathway into the profession, equipping candidates to demonstrate competence in a variety of real-world legal contexts and encouraging a culture of practical learning and accessibility.

The development of the SQE training market

The LPC was a prescribed and regulated programme with a set curriculum, including core practice areas, legal skills, and elective subjects. It was typically completed full-time in one year or part-time over two years, with integrated assessments such as exams, coursework, and practical exercises.

In contrast, the SQE does not have a prescribed training course; instead, various providers offer preparation courses tailored to the SQE assessments, which can vary in length, format, and price. Candidates can also opt for self-study, purchasing support materials – such as textbooks, practice questions, and online resources – to prepare independently for the exams. This self-directed approach adds further flexibility to the qualification pathway, allowing aspiring solicitors to shape their learning according to individual needs and circumstances. This shift reflects a move towards a more flexible and inclusive approach to legal training.

Evidence from candidates, legal employers, and training providers shows that the aim of having a variety of training options available in terms of length, format, and price is being achieved. Training providers offered a variety of SQE courses, including:

- online or remote options, both full-time and part-time



- support for independent study
- undertaking discrete SQE preparation courses or
- training towards qualifications with integrated SQE learning.

Legal employers were particularly positive that the reforms were opening up diverse SQE training options. While candidates were preparing for the SQE in a variety of ways and mostly positive about their training providers, they were neutral overall on the ease or difficulty of choosing a course that was right for them.

The cost of qualifying as a solicitor

The introduction of the SQE reforms changed how courses and exams are priced when compared to the LPC model. Under the LPC, the approach to training and qualification was prescriptive, with the SRA clearly defining course structure, content, and length. This structure offered limited flexibility and restricted opportunity to reduce training costs or for candidates to pursue earn-as-you-learn options.

In contrast, the SQE reforms allow training providers to develop and deliver more flexible training options, with no prescription from the SRA over their specific length, content, or structure. This change was intended to enable a broader range of preparatory course options at varying price points, including some options that are less costly than the LPC. The evaluation found that three-fifths of candidates spent under £5,000 on their preparatory courses, and there was a broad range of course costs. This indicates that the SQE has been fulfilling its objective of introducing more varied course options and more varied price points.

Comparing the cost of the SQE to the LPC is challenging due to the limited availability of data prior to the SQE reforms. Although direct comparisons are not straightforward, it appears that candidates are paying similar amounts or even less to qualify under the SQE than they would have under the LPC. In 2024, the combined cost of the SQE examinations was £4,790 for candidates who did not require a resit. This cost, combined with the average costs for preparatory courses, indicates that the price of SQE training and qualification was lower than the LPC which was £12,396.32 in 2020.

Although it appears training costs to candidates are likely not to have increased when compared to the LPC, many still expressed dissatisfaction with the costs associated with qualifying as a solicitor. In doing so, they expressed how they could not understand why the one-off assessment fees were so high.

Experiences of QWE

Under the LPC route to qualification, candidates were required to complete a two-year period of recognised training with an authorised employer, involving structured practical legal work under supervision in specific practice areas.

The introduction of QWE as part of the SQE reforms made three significant changes to this system:

1. QWE does not need to be completed at an organisation regulated by the SRA.
2. Employers are not required to register with the SRA to provide QWE.
3. Confirming QWE does not involve deciding whether an individual is competent and suitable to practise. Competence is determined by passing the SQE assessments rather than by a confirming solicitor at the end of a period of QWE.

These changes aim to make the qualification process more inclusive and accessible, allowing candidates to gain diverse experiences across different legal settings. The flexibility of QWE aims to enable practical exposure to a wider variety of legal work.

The evaluation gauged the perceptions of QWE, including candidates' experiences of securing and undertaking QWE opportunities and views on the effectiveness of QWE in developing key competences.

The evaluation found that candidates and legal employers generally had positive perceptions and experiences of QWE. These perceptions had improved compared to 2022, particularly among employers with experience of hosting QWE. Candidates particularly appreciated the mentorship, skills development, and flexibility offered by QWE, though some highlighted the challenges of balancing QWE with studying for the SQE.

The aim to broaden the types of legal employers participating in QWE appears on track to being achieved, with almost a fifth of candidates having done QWE at legal employers that are not law firms. There is also strong evidence that the reforms are realising their intended objective of removing unjustifiable barriers. The primary research has shown candidates from a variety of demographic and educational backgrounds have participated proportionately in QWE when compared to the overall population.

Despite these positive steps towards improving accessibility and diversity in solicitor qualification, stakeholders felt that there was still work to do in attracting candidates from different educational backgrounds. Additionally, there was some uncertainty about the quality of some QWE opportunities. Securing QWE opportunities is also a concern, with candidates in the survey divided on whether this process was easy or difficult. If candidates face significant difficulty in securing good quality QWE, this could undermine the core objective of increasing accessibility and diversity in the legal profession.

There was less of an accessibility barrier when it came to confirming QWE, with more than three quarters of candidates finding QWE confirmation easy. Where challenges did occur in confirming QWE, candidates typically cited limited employer understanding of the process, insufficient guidance for employers or solicitors resistance to confirming.

The evaluation shows that QWE is effectively supporting the development of required competences for aspiring solicitors. The Statement of Solicitor Competence acts as a blueprint for the skills and attributes an aspiring solicitor needs to acquire to be deemed ready for admission to the profession and to meet the ongoing professional standards expected of them. Over four fifths of candidates and employers agreed that QWE effectively covered the competences of the Statement of Solicitor Competence.

Confidence in the SQE reforms

All stakeholders participating in the quantitative surveys were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements on the intended outcomes of the SQE's introduction. These metrics assessed the views of candidates, employers and training providers on fairness, transparency, alignment with practical legal skills, and the accessibility of training pathways.

Evidence from these statements was used to create a composite measurement to assess the overall perception from stakeholders on how well they view the SQE to be performing against its objectives. This measure serves as an important indicator for evaluating whether the SQE reforms are achieving their intended goals of maintaining high professional standards and addressing barriers to qualification.

There were high levels of confidence among employers, and their confidence score had increased compared with 2022. Many believed the reforms aligned well with the objectives of maintaining consistent high standards and introducing diverse pathways to qualification.

In contrast, candidate confidence was lower and had declined since 2022. This lower confidence was largely due to:

- concerns about the perceived high costs of qualifying as a solicitor
- concerns around the fairness of the multiple-choice assessment methods of SQE1
- a lack of clarity on what to expect from the assessments.

Both the candidates and training providers wanted the SRA to provide more sample questions to make the exam expectations clearer.

Introduction

Background

In September 2021, the SQE was introduced. It replaced the old system of qualification of the LPC route where a range of SRA approved training providers assessed who passed the qualification with a single rigorous assessment. Detailed information about the assessment can be found on the [SQE website \[https://sqe.sra.org.uk/\]](https://sqe.sra.org.uk/).

The objectives of the SQE reforms are to provide:



1. Greater assurance of consistent high standards at the point of admission as a solicitor; and
2. New and diverse pathways to qualifying as a solicitor which:
 - Respond to the changing legal services market; and
 - Promote a diverse profession by removing artificial and unjustifiable barriers.

The SQE is composed of two distinct parts, SQE1 and SQE2, designed to rigorously test candidates' application of legal knowledge and practical skills. SQE1 primarily assesses the application of functioning legal knowledge through multiple-choice questions across foundational topics such as contract law, tort law, and property law. SQE2, on the other hand, focuses on practical legal skills. It includes both oral and written assessments over five days, including advocacy, drafting, and legal research, ensuring candidates are prepared for the realities of day-to-day legal practice.

A key element of the new qualification system is QWE, which replaces the traditional two-year period of recognised training required under the previous system. Unlike the fixed structure within the LPC route, QWE offers greater flexibility, allowing candidates to gain structured legal work experience across various roles and organisations. Additionally, employers do not need to be authorised by the SRA to provide QWE, in contrast to the provision of periods of recognised training. This shift aims to provide diverse entry points into the profession, accommodating the evolving needs of both candidates and employers while fostering inclusivity.

Compared to the previous qualification route, the SQE introduces a unified assessment structure that ensures consistency and rigour across all candidates. The LPC route featured a combination of academic and practical training but its decentralised approach meant there was a lack of assurance of consistent standards among providers. The SQE rectifies this by implementing a standardised examination, complemented by flexible QWE, assuring consistent standards at the point of qualifying as a solicitor.

In 2021, the SRA committed to a ten-year evaluation programme to assess the impact of the SQE and QWE. The evaluation programme is being conducted according to an [evaluation framework \[sra/research-publications/evaluation-framework/\]](#) which includes a set of indicators to measure progress against stated outcomes and impacts of the reforms.

Both the SQE and QWE elements of this new route to qualification are covered in the Theory of Change – a structured framework used to outline how and why the reforms should achieve their intended outcomes. A detailed explanation of the Theory of Change for the SQE reforms is presented in the technical annex.

Prior to the latest round of data collection presented in this report, two rounds of data collection were conducted:

- The SRA conducted a [baseline survey \[sra/research-publications/sqe-year-one/\]](#) in November 2022 to gather information about initial perceptions and experiences of the SQE and QWE among candidates, legal employers, training providers and other organisations. The survey found that stakeholders perceived the SQE reforms to be generally progressing well towards their objectives as much as they could at this early stage of the evaluation programme, with positive impacts on candidate decision-making, stakeholder perceptions, and equality and accessibility. However, it did highlight challenges in the training market, development of new qualification pathways, and employer adaptation to the changes.
- In November 2023, the SRA conducted its [second annual online survey \[sra/research-publications/qualifying-work-experience-survey-findings/\]](#) on experiences of QWE, asking the same QWE questions as the initial survey conducted in 2022. This found that while many candidates appreciate the flexibility and diverse opportunities provided by QWE, there were some reported challenges relating to consistency in supervision and the quality of experiences. Additionally, the participants highlighted the need for clearer guidance and support for candidates and employers to ensure effective implementation of QWE.

Evaluation objectives

The aim of this phase of the evaluation was to help the SRA understand whether the SQE reforms were perceived to be on track to achieve their stated objectives. And if they had produced any wider positive or negative impacts or unintended consequences.

The evaluation programme remains in its early stages. However, it reflects the ongoing process of implementing the reforms and allowing time for stakeholders to adapt to the changes as they

continue to take root. Many intended effects and impacts of the reforms are not expected to be felt until years five to 10.

This stage is the first in the wider evaluation programme where attitudes and experience towards the full experience of the SQE can be gathered. This is because this is the first stage where the SQE route to qualification was being followed by most aspiring solicitors, with fewer exemptions owing to participation in the LPC.

This evaluation is not designed to measure the technical components of the SQE assessments, including their design and format of the questions. This will be covered in the phase four evaluation of the SQE, a separate piece of work, which will review the design and format of the assessments.

Methodology

This subsection presents an overview of the research methodology used in this evaluation. More detailed information on the methods and approach is available in the technical annex.

Updating the Theory of Change

At the outset of the reforms in 2021/22, a [logic model and Theory of Change \[sra/research-publications/evaluation-framework/\]](#) were independently developed by the consultancy firm Pye Tait. These materials were reviewed as part of this phase of the evaluation. Six 60-minute qualitative interviews were conducted with key SRA staff to ensure the evaluation criteria remained relevant.

The findings from these interviews were then discussed in a collaborative 90-minute workshop with SRA staff, which subsequently informed the Phase three evaluation objectives. These objectives included analysing:

- candidate decision-making
- stakeholder perceptions
- impacts on equality and accessibility
- training market responses,
- new qualification pathways
- QWE opportunities
- employer adaptation
- other consequences of the reforms.

Primary research

The evaluation utilised a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to collect diverse perspectives regarding the SQE.

Surveys conducted included the candidate survey (1,868 candidates who took at least one SQE exam during the 2023-2024 academic year), employer survey (447 responses from law firms, law clinics and other employers of legal professionals), and training provider survey (28 responses). Each survey explores experiences with and perceptions of the SQE reforms. The candidate completed surveys were representative of the demographic profile of the cohort as a whole.

Qualitative research with stakeholders was conducted, including candidates (30 interviews), employers (two focus groups of employers hosting or interested in hosting SQE candidates), training providers (nine interviews), and industry stakeholders (six interviews).

Industry stakeholders were members of organisations that had a role in either supporting or advocating for diverse groups within the legal profession. Or a more generalist role in providing educational resources, training, and networking opportunities to enhance professional development within the profession.

Details regarding the methodology, sampling strategy, demographic distributions, and subgroup analyses for each survey and interview are contained in the accompanying technical annex.

Limitations

While the research took steps to maximise the validity of the findings, the following limitations were present in the research:



- While the survey captured the views of a quarter of the training provider population, the low base size of 28 completed surveys for training providers limits the extent that quantitative analysis was possible with this group. Throughout, evidence for this group is presented as fractions out of 28, though caution must be taken when interpreting the findings and should not be considered generalisable. No comparisons to previous surveys with this group were made as significant differences were not achievable with the low base size achieved.
- One key difficulty in comparing the candidate results from 2022 with those from 2025 lies in the distinct composition of the candidate cohorts. The candidates taking the SQE in 2022 included a significant proportion of transitional candidates and qualified lawyers, making them unrepresentative of the broader population expected to engage with the exam in subsequent years. For instance, more than half of the candidates in the first SQE2 assessment were either qualified lawyers or LPC transitional students. In its first year, more than 3,000 candidates took the SQE, whereas over 14,600 candidates took it in 2023/24. Furthermore, in 2022 only around 1,600 candidates reported having completed some QWE, whereas it is expected that around two thirds of candidates in the 2023/24 cohort had completed some QWE (around 9750 according to estimates produced from the survey). The research has attempted to understand this difference where possible by assessing subgroup differences but owing to the comparatively smaller sample size of the 2022 research, longitudinal weighting was deemed not appropriate.
- Opt-in research, by its nature, often attracts respondents who hold particularly strong views – whether positive or negative – about the topic under consideration. This dynamic is likely to influence the findings throughout the evaluation and should be taken into account when interpreting wave-on-wave results to monitor progress.
- It is important to note that wholly positive experiences in high-stakes assessments are uncommon due to the inherent pressures involved. This dynamic often biases survey responses towards negative perceptions, highlighting challenges and difficulties. As such, findings from these surveys should be interpreted with this skewing effect in mind.
- The findings reflect solely the perceptions of the SQE rather than its objective performance as an assessment. Consequently, all results should be interpreted within this context, recognising that they represent subjective experiences, biases, and sentiments rather than a definitive evaluation of the SQE's effectiveness.
- Although in its third phase, this is the first time data has been collected on the long-term goals of the SQE reforms. This evaluation provides early insights into stakeholder perceptions of the reforms' performance against their long-term objectives, which will take years to fully manifest.

Overall confidence in the SQE

Chapter summary

Stakeholders were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with ten statements that linked to the overarching objectives of providing greater assurance of consistent high standards at the point of admission as a solicitor and establishing new and diverse pathways to qualifying as a solicitor. The statements covered:

- maintaining high standards
- ensuring fairness
- providing clear expectations
- sufficiently testing day-one competence
- being accessible (including reasonable adjustments)
- keeping exam fees reasonable
- offering a wide choice of training
- keeping training affordable
- removing artificial barriers to entry
- promoting diversity in the profession.

The results for these ten statements have been aggregated (taking the average of each 5-point scale, where 1 is 'strongly disagree' and 5 is 'strongly agree'), to provide a composite confidence score that helps assess overall confidence in the SQE reforms. On this scale a score of 3 represents a neutral view, anything below 3 represents a negative view, and anything above 3 represents a positive view.

Legal employers felt the SQE was performing well against its objectives, reporting average confidence scores above 3. Among law firm employers specifically, perceptions have improved

over time; rising from 2.9 in 2022 to 3.4 in 2025. By comparison, candidates were generally less positive than employers, with an overall score of 2.7.

2025 Overall SQE confidence scores

The average combined SQE confidence score (out of 5) reported by each group is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Overall SQE confidence scores

	Average combined SQE score
Candidates	2.7
Law firm employers	3.4
Non-law firm legal employers	3.3
Training providers	2.2* (low base, n = 28)

Source: candidate survey 2025, employer survey 2025 and training provider survey 2025

Legal employers' average scores are above 3, showing overall agreement with the SQE confidence statements. In contrast candidates' average scores sat just below 3, indicating they perceived the SQE as performing below expectations against its objectives.

Comparing scores in 2025 and 2022

Law firm employers' confidence increased from 2.9 in 2022 to 3.4 in 2025, indicating a shift towards positive perceptions of the reforms and how they are performing against their intended objectives.

Because first-hand experience of hosting QWE opportunities can shape how employers judge the SQE in practice, confidence scores for employers who have hosted QWE and those who have not been analysed separately, as illustrated in Table 2. Both groups perceived the SQE to be performing well against its objectives, with average confidence scores above 3, however the extent of the increase in confidence compared with 2022 was greater among law firms that had not hosted QWE.

The increase in SQE confidence scores among law firm employers, particularly those without prior experience of hosting QWE, suggests growing acceptance and optimism toward the reforms. This improvement in perceptions of the SQE from all types of employers highlights growing confidence in the reforms as they become more embedded over time.

Table 2 Law firm employers' SQE confidence scores

	2022	2025
Have hosted QWE	2.8	3.3
Have not hosted QWE	2.6	3.4

Source: employer survey 2025/2022.

Across candidates, the average combined confidence score decreased from 3.1 in 2022 to 2.7 in 2025. However, as noted in the limitations section, comparison between 2025 and 2022 is not perfect and may be influenced by differences in the profile in these cohorts, meaning any changes should be interpreted with caution.

In 2022, the candidate sample included more solicitors that had already taken the LPC, and a higher share of candidates granted SQE exemptions (ie qualified lawyers), whereas the 2025 cohort included fewer exempt candidates. Additionally, a more robust base size was achieved in the 2025 survey (1,851 participants) compared with the 2022 survey (347 participants).

Candidates' perceptions of how well the SQE is performing against its objectives also varied by exam outcomes. In both 2022 and 2025, candidates who had not failed an exam were more positive than those who had failed at any point. However, between 2022 and 2025, those who had not failed saw a decline in their average confidence score from 3.2 to 2.8; a smaller decline was seen among candidates who had experienced a fail from 2.7 to 2.6, as shown in Table 3. This suggests that factors beyond pass or fail status are shaping candidate perceptions over time.

Table 3 Candidates' SQE confidence scores

	2022	2025
Who have passed an exam	3.2	2.8
Who have failed an exam	2.7	2.6

Source: candidate survey 2025/2022.

Throughout the survey, some demographic subgroups were more positive than average about the SQE, reflected in their overall confidence scores. In particular, candidates who were male, aged 35 or older, Asian, Black, or living outside the UK at the time of the survey tended to score their confidence in the SQE more favourably. Table 4 to Table 8 below illustrate these variations:

Table 4 Candidates' overall SQE confidence scores by gender

	Mean score
Male (a)	2.8 b
Female (b)	2.7

Source: 2025 candidate survey. Letters (a, b, c, d and e.) after a mean score indicate a significant difference within the same subgroup compared to the row assigned that letter.

Table 5 Candidates' overall SQE confidence scores by age group

	Mean score
16 – 24 (a)	2.5
25 – 34 (b)	2.7 a
35 – 44 (c)	2.9 ab
45+ (d)	2.9 a

Source: 2025 candidate survey. Letters (a, b, c, d and e.) after a mean score indicate a significant difference within the same subgroup compared to the row assigned that letter.

Table 6 Candidates' overall SQE confidence scores by ethnicity

	Mean score
Asian (a)	2.8 d
Black (b)	2.8 d
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups (c)	2.6
White (d)	2.7
Other (e)	2.7

Source: 2025 candidate survey. Letters (a, b, c, d and e.) after a mean score indicate a significant difference within the same subgroup compared to the row assigned that letter. These broad ethnic categories were used for analysis due to the lack of sample size to have statistically meaningful results for less-generic groups.

Table 7 Candidates' overall SQE confidence scores by SQE exam status

	Mean score
Failed an exam (a)	2.6
Never failed an exam (b)	2.8 a

Source: 2025 candidate survey. Letters (a, b, c, d and e.) after a mean score indicate a significant difference within the same subgroup compared to the row assigned that letter.

Table 8 Candidates' overall SQE confidence scores by country

	Mean score
UK (a)	2.6

Outside the UK (b) 3.0 a

Source: 2025 candidate survey. Letters (a, b, c, d and e.) after a mean score indicate a significant difference within the same subgroup compared to the row assigned that letter.

These differences hold true both at an overall level and when examining the individual SQE confidence statements.

As these subgroup differences are observed across all individual SQE confidence statements, they are summarised here and not repeated at each confidence statement. This is to avoid repetition in the chapters that follow.

Perceptions and experiences of the SQE

Chapter summary

This chapter explores the results for individual statements that contribute to the overall SQE confidence score that relate specifically to the SQE's first objective to provide greater assurance of consistent high standards at the point of admission as a solicitor. These statements explore stakeholders' perceptions of the SQE in terms of whether it:

- ensures consistently high standards of all solicitors at the point of qualification
- is a fair assessment
- is clear in its expectations
- sufficiently tests the necessary knowledge and skills to practise competently as a solicitor on day one of practice.

Most stakeholders considered the SQE to uphold consistent high standards at the point of qualification. Training providers expressed the greatest confidence in this aspect, attributing the increased quality of both training and assessment to the competitiveness of the SQE training market and the perceived difficulty of the exams. Many candidates and training providers valued the SQE's rigour, noting that its challenging nature was appropriate for ensuring that only those fully prepared for the demands of legal practice could qualify. Furthermore, SQE2 was positively regarded, due to its alignment with real-world legal practice, with both candidates and providers acknowledging that this component effectively assessed the practical skills and competences necessary for day one solicitors. Candidates were generally positive about the quality of training, in particular the course content and the usefulness of the materials provided, supporting the drive towards high standards.

In contrast, there was less agreement among stakeholders around the fairness and clarity of the SQE, especially SQE1. Candidates were much less likely than other stakeholders to agree that the assessment was fair or clear, with many perceiving the wording of questions to be unnecessarily complex or designed to mislead test-takers. Specific concerns included the reliance on multiple-choice formats, perceived as favouring luck over competence and failing to reflect the realities of legal practice. Clarity was another major concern, with both candidates and training providers expressing a desire for more sample questions to improve their understanding of what to expect in the actual exams. Additionally, some candidates and employers felt that the SQE1 overly emphasised memory over practical skill, and that the breadth of subjects tested was not always relevant to their intended career paths. The technical components of the assessments, such as their design, structure, and length, were not in scope for this evaluation. These will be examined in the next phase of the evaluation programme.

Consistent high standards of all solicitors at the point of qualification

This section examines the extent to which each stakeholder group considered the SQE to ensure consistent high standards at the point of qualification. For legal employers, ensuring consistent high standards for SQE helps ensure that new solicitors entering the workforce are well-equipped with essential skills and knowledge. For candidates, the SQE's high standards provide a clear and consistent benchmark, ensuring they are fully prepared to meet the professional demands and responsibilities of being a solicitor.

The survey results found that training providers had the most confidence that the SQE will ensure consistent high standards at the point of qualification (16 out of 28) when compared to the other stakeholder groups.

The views of law firm employers and non-law firm legal employers were more positive than negative, with 38% of law firm employers, and 41% of non-law firm legal employers agreeing with this statement. The proportion of employers agreeing the SQE will ensure consistent high standards was similar in 2022, while confidence among candidates has significantly decreased since the 2022 evaluation, from 68% to 41%.

Table 9 Levels of agreement with the statement 'the SQE will ensure consistent high standards at the point of qualification' by stakeholder group

	Candidates - 2025	Candidates - 2022	Law firms - 2025	Law firms - 2022	Non-law firms - 2025	Training providers - 2025
Base	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (1852)	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (347)	All (365)	All (104)	All (85)	All (28)
Agree	41%*	68%	38%	34%	41%	16/28
Neither	13%	13%	30%	21%	30%	7/28
Disagree	44%*	16%	21%*	38%	15%	5/28
Net	-3%*	52%	17%*	-4%	26%	39%

Source: candidate survey 2025/2022, employer survey 2025/2022 and training provider survey 2025

Note: Columns may not total to 100% as don't know responses not shown and rounding to the nearest integer

* denotes significant change between the previous evaluations results.

Training providers expanded on why they considered the SQE to ensure consistent high standards at the point of qualification, with the key themes being:

- the market is highly competitive, driving the development of the highest quality of training
- the exams are not easy to pass, demonstrating high standards at the point of entry into the profession.

'As the market is so fiercely competitive in terms of providing high quality provision of SQE preparation courses, that has raised the overall quality and raised the bar as to who provides the best services.'

Training provider

Some candidates also felt that the difficulty and level of detail candidates were expected to know in order to pass the exam was helping to drive high standards.

'It's good that it's hard because it shouldn't be an easy exam.'

Candidate: 16-24 yrs, white, passed both SQE1 and SQE2

In focus groups with employers, a few explained having a preference to take on candidates who have gone through the old system rather than through SQE. From the perspective of some employers, choosing candidates who have gone through the SQE route increased a perceived risk to their company, as they are investing resource on a candidate who may or may not become a qualified solicitor down the line, on top of the perceived reduced quality of SQE candidates compared to those that come from the old route.

'I understand the wanting to make it consistent because different LPC providers did things different ways.'

Law firm employer: has current or previous experience hosting QWE and LPC training

'The consistency of the exams has improved... but I think it [standards] comes down to the firm, the prep course that's been done, and the student individually.'

Law firm employer: has current or previous experience hosting QWE and LPC training

Despite positivity among some candidates and most training providers about the exams, concerns around the fairness, clarity, and the suitability of the assessment led others to believe the SQE was falling short of ensuring consistent high standards. Specific findings for each of these areas are presented in turn below.

Fairness of the assessment

This section examines the extent to which each stakeholder group considered the SQE to be a fair assessment that is able to objectively pass and fail candidates based on their competence. For legal employers, this guarantees that the solicitors they hire have been rigorously and impartially assessed, ensuring a competent and reliable workforce. For training providers, a fair and objective SQE ensures that their efforts in preparing candidates are accurately reflected in the assessment outcomes. For candidates, it provides a transparent and equitable pathway to qualification, ensuring that success is based solely on their competence and readiness to practise law.

Just over a third of law firm employers (37%) and non-law firm employers (36%) and 13 out of 28 training providers agreed that the SQE is a fair assessment. Despite this statement receiving low levels of confidence compared to the other SQE statements, law firm employers' confidence levels have increased from neutral to net positive since 2022, indicating a shift toward greater overall acceptance of the SQE.

Of all the statements used to seek views on SQE standards, this is the area where candidates were least likely to agree, with less than a third considering the assessment to be fair (28%) and a majority of candidates disagreeing with this statement (63%). The proportion of candidates that perceived the SQE to be a fair exam has significantly decreased since the 2022 evaluation (55%). Candidates who failed an SQE exam were most negative, with only 16% considering it a fair assessment, though candidates who had passed their assessments were still divided on the level of fairness of the exam, with 40% of this group agreeing the assessments were fair.

Table 10 Level of agreement with the statement 'the SQE is a fair assessment and is able to objectively pass and fail candidates based on their competence' by stakeholder group

	Candidates - 2025	Candidates - 2022	Law firms - 2025	Law firms - 2022	Non-law firms - 2025	Training providers - 2025
Base	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (1852)>	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (347)	All (365)	All (104)	All (85)	All (28)
Agree	28% *	55%	37%	33%	36%	13/28
Neither	7%	14%	28%	26%	31%	5/28
Disagree	63%	31%	17%*	33%*	13%	10/28
Net	-35%*	24%	20%*	0%	23%	11%

Source: candidate survey 2025/2022, employer survey 2025/2022 and training provider survey 2025

Note: Columns may not total to 100% as don't know responses not shown and rounding to the nearest integer

* denotes significant change between the previous evaluation's results.

Almost all the criticism of the exam's fairness was focused on the question wording within SQE1 specifically, including perceptions among more negative candidates that some of the questions and answers had been designed to trick the candidate, with dense and difficult wording. Some candidates were also concerned that the multiple-choice format of SQE1 itself was not fair. They felt that there were fine margins between passing and failing on each sitting, and for those who just manage to pass, or those who were only a couple of marks off passing, this margin was largely decided by how lucky they got when guessing the answers to the questions they did not know or understand.

'Testing somebody on a single best answer question is not teaching people how to be a solicitor, it's teaching people that if you don't know the answer, then guess.'

Candidate: 16-24 yrs, white, failed SQE1

Another (less prevalent) reason given by candidates for feeling the exams were unfair, was the perception that there was an unconscious bias against some groups of candidates, particularly neurodivergent and those from ethnic minority backgrounds, with some giving anecdotal accounts of disproportionate failure rates. Training providers also explained how they believed that some people are naturally better multiple-choice exam-takers than others. SQE data confirms that there are differential outcomes from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds compared to White candidates, as was also seen on the LPC. However, data shows that despite these concerns, candidates declaring a disability (linked with neurodiversity) achieved [similar or even](#)

[higher pass rates](https://sqa.sra.org.uk/docs/default-source/pdfs/reports/sqa-annual-report-2024.pdf?sfvrsn=2ce59e1a_21) [\[https://sqa.sra.org.uk/docs/default-source/pdfs/reports/sqa-annual-report-2024.pdf?sfvrsn=2ce59e1a_21\]](https://sqa.sra.org.uk/docs/default-source/pdfs/reports/sqa-annual-report-2024.pdf?sfvrsn=2ce59e1a_21) compared to others for SQE1 and SQE2 respectively.

'It [the SQE] isn't fair to people who have dyslexia or ADHD. You ask them to sit in a room and click through however many hundred multiple choice questions in a row, and then use that as a basis for determining whether or not they're suitable to become a lawyer.'

Candidate: 25-34 yrs, white, passed both SQE1 and SQE2

'It's quite hard to ignore that in my class – everyone who failed was Black or Asian. The pass rate for Black candidates is so low.'

Candidate: 25-34 yrs, white, passed both SQE1 and SQE2

A few candidates also expressed frustration and confusion over the standard-setting process used in the SQE exams. Many found it unclear how their raw scores were converted and felt there was insufficient transparency around the marking system. This lack of clarity led to perceptions of inconsistency and arbitrariness, making candidates question whether the assessment was fair, and whether their results fully reflected their actual performance. It is important to note that Kaplan uses standard setting to adjust for differences in exam difficulty across sittings, ensuring all candidates are judged by the same standard regardless of the specific questions they faced. This ensures fairness by compensating for variations, so that passing reflects consistent levels of competence rather than random small fluctuations in paper difficulty. This approach is clearly outlined on the [SQE website](https://sqa.sra.org.uk/policies/markings-and-standard-setting-policy) [\[https://sqa.sra.org.uk/policies/markings-and-standard-setting-policy\]](https://sqa.sra.org.uk/policies/markings-and-standard-setting-policy) and is consistent with assessment practices commonly adopted internationally.

Most of the concerns that training providers had around fairness were linked to clarity, which is discussed below.

Clarity of the SQE

This section examines the extent each stakeholder group considered the expectations of the SQE to be clear both in terms of the content it covers and the standard at which it assesses that content. This is important for legal employers as clear expectations provide confidence that the solicitors they hire have demonstrated they have been assessed against well-defined standards, ensuring consistency and reliability in their professional capabilities. For training providers, clear SQE expectations guide their curricula and ensure these are designed to meet the specific requirements of the assessment, leading to better-prepared candidates. For candidates, having clear SQE expectations supports their understanding of what is required to pass the SQE, allowing them to focus their preparation effectively and approach the assessment with confidence.

The statement about clarity had the lowest rating of all the statements on SQE standards among training providers, with 12 out of 28 agreeing that the expectations of the SQE are clear, providing a net neutral score overall.

Much like the statement on fairness, a high proportion of candidates (60%) disagreed that the expectations of SQE are clear, with a net agreement score of -28%. Agreement with this statement among candidates has significantly decreased from 49% in the 2022 survey to 32% in 2025.

Conversely, employers were mostly positive, with 40% of law firm employers and a third of non-law firm legal employers (33%) agreeing with this statement. Disagreement levels have decreased among law firm employers since 2022 (now 11%, down from 24%).

Table 11 Level of agreement with the statement 'the expectations of the SQE are clear both in terms of the content they cover and the standard at which they assess that content' by stakeholder group

	Candidates - 2025	Candidates - 2022	Law firms - 2025	Law firms - 2022	Non-law firms - 2025	Training providers - 2025
Base	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (1852)	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (347)	All (365)	All (104)	All (85)	All (28)
Agree	32% *	49%	40%	41%	33%	12/28
Neither	8%	12%	30%	27%	32%	4/28
Disagree	60%	38%	11%*	24%	8%	12/28

Net	-28%	11%	29%*	17%	25%	0%
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Source: candidate survey 2025/2022, employer survey 2025/2022 and training provider survey 2025

Note: Columns may not total to 100% as don't know responses not shown and rounding to the nearest integer

* denotes significant change between the previous evaluation's results.

Lack of access to past papers was the main reason candidates felt SQE expectations were unclear, with some training providers also echoing this sentiment. Many felt the expectations they had on the content of the exam and the types of questions they would face did not match what they experienced on the day.

'I think some of the information around the SQE, especially SQE2, could be made a little bit clearer. More along the lines of what to expect on the day. From my experience, the day was different to what I expected.'

Candidate: 16-24 yrs, white, passed SQE

'[The sample questions] are deceptively simple, they're nothing like that in real life. [The SRA] never publish questions from the previous sitting. They must publish these papers.'

Candidate: 35-44 yrs, white, failed SQE1

It is important to highlight that the SRA does not provide past papers for SQE1. This is to protect the security and integrity of the question bank, as questions may be reused in future sittings. Instead, the SRA provides a set of sample questions, which are designed to give candidates a clear understanding of the style and standard of the exam. These include questions that have previously appeared in SQE1 papers. This allows candidates and training providers to see real examples of questions that have featured in the exam. The purpose of these sample questions is to provide a representative sample, not a full archive of past papers.

Concerns about the clarity of SQE expectations among candidates were not universal. The top reasons candidates gave for being satisfied with their training providers included the structure or content of the course and materials (42%), access to mock exams of sufficient quality (34%), and the quality of the materials (26%) and training (26%). The interviews with candidates reinforced some of these positive experiences, particularly in terms of the usefulness of guidance provided by training providers on how to structure their SQE2 exam responses, and development of client interviewing and advocacy skills.

Candidates that felt SQE expectations were unclear were more likely than average to be dissatisfied with their training provider. The main cause of candidate dissatisfaction with training providers was candidates' perceptions that the quality of training or materials was poor (57%). Issues concerning the quality of mock materials also contributed towards negative feelings about training providers. Nearly one-third of candidates dissatisfied with their training provider mentioned not being given access to sufficient quality mock exams (31%). It is unclear from the evidence whether candidates were speaking of mock questions the training providers had created or the sample questions the SRA provided, though training providers themselves mentioned getting similar feedback from their students that the SRA's sample questions in particular do not reflect the exam difficulty.

It is important to note that many of the sample questions the SRA provides are retired questions no longer used in the assessment. As such, the sample questions do meet the standard and difficulty level of the exam, though this was often not understood by candidates or training providers.

'We rely on the SRA's sample questions, but students say the actual exam is different.'

Training provider

Most training providers understood the SRA's need to keep the assessment specification at a high level, noting that adopting a more prescriptive method that included past papers could potentially diminish the rigour integral to the qualification process. While not concerned with the quality of the sample questions, training providers felt the quantity of sample questions provided was insufficient. For context, the SRA has released a total of 170 sample questions for SQE1, though

training providers highlighted how they felt these questions alone were not enough to get the full sense of what an exam is like with the SQE1 assessment itself consisting of 360 multiple-choice questions in total across both FLK1 and FLK2. Several training providers described creating their own practice or mock questions, using the sample questions as a basis. They expressed how they had low confidence in their ability to do this, struggling to get their questions to reflect the assessment. They felt that the provision of more sample questions would better enable them to create mock questions. These findings show that the provision of more sample questions could help to improve the experience of both training providers and candidates by reducing uncertainties about the nature of the assessment.

The SQE testing necessary knowledge and skills

This section examines the extent each stakeholder group considered the SQE to sufficiently test the knowledge and skills needed to practise competently as a solicitor on day one of practice. For legal employers, a rigorous SQE provides them with confidence that newly qualified solicitors possess the essential competences needed to practise as a day one solicitor. For training providers, it ensures that their programmes are effectively preparing candidates for the realities of legal practice. For candidates, a comprehensive SQE ensures they are fully equipped with the practical skills and knowledge needed to handle the responsibilities of being a solicitor, instilling confidence in their ability to practise competently from the outset.

Notably more legal employers disagreed with this statement compared to the other statements on SQE standards, though the net score has improved to be positive overall, compared with a negative net score in 2022.

Training providers were the most positive of all the stakeholders with 16 out of 28 agreeing that the assessment provides candidates with the necessary knowledge and skills.

Candidates were net negative on this statement, with a substantial reduction in agreement since 2022 (-22% in 2025 compared to 33% in 2022).

Table 12 Levels of agreement with the statement 'the SQE sufficiently tests the knowledge and skills needed to practise competently as a solicitor on day one of practice' by stakeholder group

	Candidates - 2025	Candidates - 2022	Legal employers - 2025	Legal employers - 2022	Non-law firms- 2025	Training providers - 2025
Base	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (1852)	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (347)	All (365)	All (104)	All (85)	All (28)
Agree	33% *	57%	29%	25%	29%	16/28
Neither	10%	15%	29%	23%	31%	3/28
Disagree	55%*	24%	24%*	44%	19%	9/28
Net	-22%*	33%	5%*	-19%	10%	25%

: candidate survey 2025/2022, employer survey 2025/2022 and training provider survey 2025

Note: Columns may not total to 100% as don't know responses not shown and rounding to the nearest integer

* denotes significant change between the previous evaluation's results.

For those with the perception that the SQE does not sufficiently test the knowledge and skills needed to practise competently as a solicitor on day one of practice, this was primarily influenced by the feeling among some candidates and employers that the SQE exam heavily emphasises memory rather than the practical skills necessary for a solicitor. Again, this criticism was focused solely on SQE1, where many candidates felt the use of multiple-choice single best answer questions was disconnected from the real-world problem-solving and judgement required in legal practice.

'Person A might have a better sense of memory than Person B and smash SQE1 first time, compared to someone who's been working in the industry for six years, can go and deal with clients on a daily basis, is great at what they do and is a real lawyer in practice, but struggles more so with memorising all the areas of law. I just don't think that's very relative.



Candidate: 16-24 yrs, mixed ethnicity, passed SQE

'A memory test of 360 questions, I don't feel is fair and it doesn't replicate real world experience.'

Training provider

In contrast, most candidates thought SQE2 was well aligned with real-world practices and therefore appreciated its practical relevance.

'SQE2 was helpful as it tested my practical legal skills.'

Candidate: 16-24 yrs, passed both SQE1 and SQE2

There was a small proportion of candidates and employers who felt candidates had to learn about too many legal subjects that were irrelevant to their intended career or law firm's practice, rather than being able to specialise in their intended areas of practice. It is important here to highlight that the SQE1 assesses candidates on a wide range of legal subjects (including constitutional and administrative law, contract, tort, property, business law, criminal law, dispute resolution, and ethics) because solicitors in England and Wales require a comprehensive foundation to competently address the diverse legal issues they may encounter in practice.

It should be noted that a separate phase four evaluation is planned to review the design and format of the SQE assessments, including their effectiveness in measuring the necessary skills and knowledge to practise as a day one solicitor.

SQE pathways

Chapter summary

This chapter explores the extent to which the SQE is on track to meet its objectives of supporting new and diverse pathways to qualifying as a solicitor. In addition to examining stakeholder perceptions regarding this aim, this chapter also explores whether stakeholders perceived that:

- candidates can choose from a wide range of SQE training options
- the SQE will help remove artificial and unjustifiable barriers to entering the solicitor profession
- the SQE will help promote diversity at the point of entry to the solicitor profession
- the SQE is accessible to all candidates, including those who need reasonable adjustments
- the fees for sitting are reasonable
- candidates can find affordable SQE training options.

Results show that, compared with other stakeholders (and the earlier cohort of candidates), candidates were less confident about the SQE meeting its aims of supporting new and diverse pathways and removing artificial and unjustifiable barriers to becoming a solicitor. Candidates were particularly negative regarding the costs associated with SQE, including the affordability of SQE training options and the cost of sitting the exams. This is despite three-fifths of candidates paying less than £5,000 for their SQE training and associated materials. Though candidate agreement levels were generally lower than other stakeholders for these statements, it is worth noting that they are not able to benchmark the SQE reforms against the old LPC system in the same way that employers and training providers might, as most candidates do not have experience of the LPC.

Law firm employers, in particular, had higher levels of agreement across most of the statements, including perceptions around the costs of the qualification, with half of law firm employers agreeing that the fees for sitting the SQE were reasonable. Law firm employer agreement levels were generally net positive with over 50% agreement around the statements that the SQE will help promote diversity at the point of entry to the solicitor profession and that candidates can choose from a wide range of SQE training options.

Training providers were more positive in their views towards the SQE. Like candidates, among all the statements regarding pathways objectives, training providers were least likely to agree that the fees to sit the SQE were reasonable. Training providers expressed more positive, although still mixed, opinions that the SQE will help to remove artificial barriers to the profession or that it was accessible to all candidates. However, training providers were positive that there were a wide range of training options.

Overall, the findings suggest that while a wide range of SQE training options is available and being delivered, candidates were divided on whether this is the case. Challenges around equipping candidates with the information they need to choose the right training option that best suits their needs, as well as the financial burden of study (particularly for those not sponsored by employers), could undermine efforts to remove unjustifiable and artificial barriers and to promote diversity in the profession.

Whether the SQE will promote new and diverse pathways

This section looks at whether people think the SQE will encourage new and diverse ways to qualify as a solicitor. It reviews how candidates and other groups responded to this idea and explores if there are enough SQE training options available. It also considers what support training providers are getting to help achieve these goals.

Candidates were asked if, over time, the SQE will help promote diversity at the point of entry to the solicitor profession. Only one in five candidates (21%) agreed with this statement, a lower proportion than in 2022 (44%). However, it is worth noting that when candidates were asked their reasons for disagreeing in qualitative interviews, many did not know the context of the SQE reforms and why these might do more to promote diversity than the previous LPC system.

In contrast, training providers, law firms and non-law firm legal employers, all of whom have greater contextual knowledge about the objectives of the reforms, were asked whether the SQE will promote new and diverse pathways to qualify as a solicitor. All three stakeholder groups were fairly positive with over half of training providers (15 out of 28), law firms (54%) and non-law firm legal employers (55%) agreeing with this statement.

Table 13 Levels of agreement with the statement 'Over time, the SQE will promote new and diverse pathways to qualifying as a solicitor' by stakeholder group. Candidates were asked a similar but slightly rephrased question 'Over time, the SQE will help promote diversity at the point of entry to the solicitor profession'.

	Candidates - 2025	Candidates - 2022	Law firms - 2025	Law firms - 2022	Non-law firms - 2025	Training providers - 2025
Base	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (1852)	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (347)	All (365)	All (104)	All (85)	All (28)
Agree	21%*	44%	54%*	26%	55%	15/28
Neither	13%	22%	23%	26%	20%	5/28
Disagree	57%*	28%	11%*	42%	13%	8/28
Net	-36%*	16%	43%*	-16%	42%	25%

Source: candidate survey 2025/2022, employer survey 2025/2022 and training provider survey 2025

Note: Columns may not total to 100% as don't know responses not shown and rounding to the nearest integer

* denotes significant change between the previous evaluation's results.

Offering a wide range of SQE training options

Making the SQE more accessible to all candidates relies, in part, on training providers offering courses at different price points (the costs of qualifying are discussed later in the chapter), providing opportunities for candidates from diverse backgrounds with a route to qualification. The SQE reforms also allow greater course flexibility than the LPC previously offered; this includes different modes of completing training including online, in person (or hybrid), and through different programme structures, such as apprenticeships, work-based experience and University study. By offering more choice and flexibility, it is hoped the SQE will open up access to the profession and enable candidates to better fit their studies around work and other responsibilities.

All stakeholder groups were asked about the extent to which they agreed that candidates can choose from a wide range of SQE training options. Overall, two-fifths of candidates (41%) agreed with this statement, a lower proportion than in 2022 (59%). Differences should be noted in the characteristics of the 2022 cohort, and that for this earlier cohort there would have been a better

understanding of how SQE compares to the old LPC system due to the greater prevalence of the LPC at the time.

Around half (51%) of law firm employers agreed that candidates can choose from a wide range of SQE training options, higher than the proportion observed among non-law firm employers (35%). For law firm employers, the proportion represented an increase on 2022 levels of agreement (43%). Training providers were most positive about candidate choice, with a large majority (21 out of 28) agreeing they can choose from a wider range of training options.

Table 14 Levels of agreement with the statement 'Candidates can choose from a wide range of SQE training options, to find one that suits their needs and circumstances' by stakeholder group

	Candidates - 2025	Candidates - 2022	Law firms - 2025	Law firms - 2022	Non-law firms - 2025	Training providers - 2025
Base	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (1852)	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (347)	All (365)	All (104)	All (85)	All (28)
Agree	41%*	59%	51%	43%	35%	21/28
Neither	16%	18%	24%	23%	31%	4/28
Disagree	36%*	20%	5%*	22%	11%	2/28
Net	5%*	39%	46%*	21%	24%	68%

Source: candidate survey 2025/2022, employer survey 2025/2022 and training provider survey 2025

Note: Columns may not total to 100% as don't know responses not shown and rounding to the nearest integer

* denotes significant change between the previous evaluation's results.

Survey findings from training providers provide further insight into how SQE training courses are being delivered. Most commonly, the training providers offered courses that are only delivered online or remotely (20 out of 28). Smaller proportions offered courses that utilised hybrid delivery (9 out of 28) and only in person delivery (6 out of 28). Though, it was possible for training providers to pick more than one option, as they may have offered multiple courses (eg it may be possible to deliver one SQE course solely online and another solely in person).

Three-quarters of training providers provided materials for individuals who wished to study for the SQE independently (21 out of 28). Overall, these results show that training providers were offering flexible modes and options of study for candidates. Training providers mainly provided both full and part time courses (20 out of 28). Only small proportions of training providers offered only part time (4 out of 28) or only full time (2 out of 28) courses. That most training providers were offering full and part time courses further emphasises the options and flexibility afforded to candidates.

How training providers are being supported to offer more diverse pathways

The LPC offered a structured pathway into the profession via a prescribed training course with assessments written and delivered by the training providers themselves but overseen by the SRA. Training providers for the SQE create their own courses based on information on the content and assessment structure from SRA resources to help prepare candidates for taking the standardised SQE assessment. It is up to individual training providers to engage with these resources and choose how they market their courses.

The survey asked training providers which sources of information they use to understand their role in supporting candidates taking the SQE. A wide range of SRA resources were used by most training providers when developing their courses. Most training providers had used guidance from the SRA website (25 out of 28), SQE assessment specifications (20 out of 28), and SRA published sample questions (19 out of 28).

Additionally, the majority had attended meetings with the SRA (17 out of 28). Kaplan were involved in setting up the SQE alongside the SRA and ran informative meetings with prospective training providers around what to expect. Kaplan continues to run meetings for training providers, and just over a third of training providers attended meetings (10 out of 28).

Training providers were generally positive in terms of how useful they found the sources of information they had used. Around half the respective groups of training providers found guidance from the SRA website (12 out of 25), information from SQE assessment specifications (11 out of 20) and published sample questions (9 out of 19) very useful sources of information.

Around a third found the meetings arranged by the SRA they attended very useful (6 out of 17). Only a very small proportion found any of these resources not at all useful (1 out of 25 for the SRA website, 1 out of 20 for SQE assessment specifications and 3 out of 17 for meetings arranged by the SRA they attended). All training providers who utilised the sample questions found them at least slightly useful.

Half of the training provider surveyed (14 out of 28) mentioned there was plenty of useful information about the SQE that they valued, but there were some aspects of the SQE they were unable to find information about from the current sources available to them. Training providers were widely engaging with SRA resources. Most have used guidance from the SRA website and the SQE assessment specifications and SRA published sample questions. Training providers were also finding these resources useful to help create their courses.

Whether SQE reforms will help remove artificial and unjustifiable barriers to entering the profession

This section examines stakeholder perceptions of whether the SQE is, over time, helping to remove artificial and unjustifiable barriers to the solicitor profession, focusing on issues around general accessibility, access to information to inform training decisions and the costs associated with qualification.

When stakeholders were asked explicitly whether the SQE reforms will help remove artificial and unjustifiable barriers to qualification, only one in five candidates agreed (19%), with nearly two-thirds disagreeing (62%). It is likely that candidate dissatisfaction with costs and clarity (discussed later) affected how candidates perceived this question.

Training providers were more positive, with a higher proportion agreeing with this statement (13 out of 28), which was similar to the proportion of law firm employers (44%). Around a third of non-law firm legal employers agreed (36%).

Law firm employers were considerably more likely than they were in 2022 to agree that the SQE will, over time, remove artificial and unjustifiable barriers to entering the solicitor profession (44% vs. 20%). In contrast, candidates were less likely to agree with this statement than they were in 2022 (19% vs. 28%).

Table 15 Levels of agreement with the statement 'Over time, the SQE will help remove artificial and unjustifiable barriers to entering the solicitor profession' by stakeholder group

	Candidates - 2025	Candidates - 2022	Law firms - 2025	Law firms - 2022	Non-law firms - 2025	Training providers - 2025
Base	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (1852)	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (347)	All (365)	All (104)	All (85)	All (28)
Agree	19%*	44%	44%	25%	36%	13/28
Neither	12%	19%	22%	21%	21%	5/28
Disagree	62%*	31%	21%*	47%	28%	10/28
Net	-43%*	13%	23%*	-22%	8%	10%

Source: candidate survey 2025/2022, employer survey 2025/2022 and training provider survey 2025

Note: Columns may not total to 100% as don't know responses not shown and rounding to the nearest integer

* denotes significant change between the previous evaluation's results.

Accessibility

Providing accessible routes to qualification encourages participation from a diverse range of candidates and helps to remove artificial and unjustifiable barriers to becoming a solicitor. This in

turn means employers can choose from a wider pool of talented candidates, driving further confidence in the SQE and the practice-readiness of candidates. All stakeholder groups were asked whether they believe that the SQE is accessible to all candidates, including disabled candidates who need reasonable adjustments. Agreement was fairly low for this statement among all groups. The survey found candidates had the lowest levels of agreement (26%), followed by non-law firm legal employers (33%). Higher proportions of training providers (16 out of 28) and law firm employers (47%) agreed (26%).

A lower proportion of candidates than in 2022 agreed that the SQE is accessible to all candidates (26% vs. 45%). By contrast, law firms were more likely to agree than they were in 2022 (47% in 2025 vs. 37% in 2022).

Table 16 Levels of agreement with the statement 'The SQE is accessible to all candidates, including those who need reasonable adjustments' by stakeholder group

	Candidates - 2025	Candidates - 2022	Law firms - 2025	Law firms - 2022	Non-law firms - 2025	Training providers - 2025
Base	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (1852)	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (347)	All (365)	All (104)	All (85)	All (28)
Agree	26%*	45%	47%	37%	33%	16/28
Neither	12%	19%	25%	23%	34%	2/28
Disagree	45%*	21%	9%*	29%	7%	10/28
Net	-19%*	24%	38%*	8%	26%	21%

Source: candidate survey 2025/2022, employer survey 2025/2022 and training provider survey 2025

Note: Columns may not total to 100% as don't know responses not shown and rounding to the nearest integer

* denotes significant change between the previous evaluation's results.

Qualitative interviews found that (as described in the previous section) candidates perceived the SQE to offer flexibility, and therefore accessibility, through the different training structures and modes of study available. In particular, being able to study and work at the same time was a positive step in improving access to qualifying as a solicitor. There was a perception that it was harder to mix study and work under the LPC.

However, these interviews also founds that some candidates felt the SQE was falling short in terms of financial accessibility, typically due to complaints about the cost of studying and sitting for the SQE (this is discussed later in this chapter).

Access to information about training options and choosing the right provider

The survey findings suggest that information on the SQE was widely available and used. Survey results showed that candidates heard about the SQE through a wide range of sources, including universities (36%), the [SRA website \(/become-solicitor/sqe/sqe-training-options/training-provider-list/\)](https://www.sra.org.uk/about/become-solicitor/sqe/sqe-training-options/training-provider-list/) (29%), their employers (23%), the news (18%), social media (13%), family and friends (13%) and careers fairs (5%).

Qualitative interviews corroborated that training providers used a variety of methods to promote SQE preparatory courses, with some using more active marketing through social media, search engine marketing, law fairs, partnerships with employers, and direct outreach to universities. However, some training providers said they did not actively promote their courses, relying instead on word of mouth from current students and alumni.

Another potential barrier is the process of finding the right training option. Again, having diverse pathways is not alone enough to remove artificial barriers that could impact diversity in the profession if potential candidates feel ill-equipped to choose the best training options to suit their needs. Candidates were polarised in terms of how easy or difficult it was to find the right training arrangement for them (36% found it easy and 37% that found it difficult). Candidates who had not failed an SQE exam were more likely to say they found the right training course (48% vs. 27% who failed an exam). Advertisement of training courses is not reaching some candidates, and this

might explain why some candidates are less likely to feel that there are a wide range of training courses available.

Where candidates found choosing a training option challenging, this was often due to a perceived lack of transparency of information, with some saying there was a lack of any real guidance on what to base their choice on. Candidates who found the process easy noted that providers tended to have similar information on their websites and similar price structures, which assisted them in making their decision.

'There should be more transparency about course quality, so students, especially those funding themselves, know where to put their money.'

Candidate: 25-34 yrs, failed an SQE exam

Candidates were asked how useful they would have found it to see data on SQE pass rates for each individual course available when making their decision. This could provide more transparency while in turn, encouraging training providers to improve the quality of their training. Three-quarters (75%) of candidates thought this would be 'very useful'. Candidates elaborated in qualitative interviews that access to this data would help their selection and allow better accountability of training providers. Some also mentioned that given different training providers run courses in different ways and with different materials, having pass rates available would allow candidates to better judge which training methods are most effective.

'If I take the SQE2, [and for example another training provider] published their results and it was a 99% pass rate or something similar, but my provider didn't publish their results, it would make me immediately feel unconfident in their abilities to teach us properly. So I think it definitely helps.'

Candidate: 25-34 yrs, Passed both SQE1 and SQE2

Costs of studying for and sitting the SQE

The costs of qualification, including costs of preparatory SQE training and the cost of sitting the examinations, are clearly an important indicator in assessing whether the SQE is removing unjustifiable barriers and providing a greater range of training options in terms of different price points. This section explores these costs, how they compare with the LPC (though the comparison is imperfect) and stakeholder views on the affordability of the SQE.

Preparatory training costs

Candidates were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed that they can find affordable SQE training options. Only a small proportion (17%) of candidates agreed with this statement, compared to two-thirds (66%) who disagreed. These results mark a more negative result than in 2022, when 31% of candidates agreed and 49% of candidates disagreed. Again, caution should be applied in interpreting these comparisons as the 2022 cohort included a greater share of solicitors who had already taken the LPC, and were already working for an employer, which likely resulted in a reduced, or less impactful financial burden.

Table 17 Levels of agreement with the statement 'Candidates can find affordable SQE training options' by candidates

	Candidates - 2025	Candidates - 2022
Base	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (1852)	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (347)
Agree	17%*	31%
Neither	10%	16%
Disagree	66%*	49%
Net	-49%*	-18%

Source: candidate survey 2025/2022

Note: Columns may not total to 100% as don't know responses not shown and rounding to the nearest integer

* denotes significant change between the previous evaluation's results.

Employers and training providers were asked if they agreed that SQE training options can be found at a range of price points. Training providers were most likely to agree with the statement

(21 out of 28). A third (32%) of law firm employers agreed SQE training options can be found at a range of price points, though this appears a low proportion. Overall, there was 24% net positive agreement due to high proportions of neutral (32%) and don't know (28%) responses. Non-law firm legal employers were evenly split between agreement and disagreement with the statement (each 13%), with most neutral or unsure.

Table 18 Levels of agreement with the statement 'Candidates can find SQE training options at a range of price points' by stakeholder group

	Law firms - 2025	Non-law firms - 2025	Training providers - 2025
Base	All (365)	All (85)	All (28)
Agree	32%	13%	21/28
Neither	32%	41%	4/28
Disagree	8%	13%	2/28
Net	24%	0%	68%

Source: employer survey 2025 and training provider survey 2025

Note: Columns may not total to 100% as don't know responses not shown and rounding to the nearest integer

Beyond considering perceptions around affordability and the range of SQE training price points, the candidate survey also shed some light on how candidates funded their training and the costs they incurred. The variety of SQE training options - ranging from integrated degree courses and apprenticeships to independent study - meant that there were varying levels of financial burden on candidates when preparing for the SQE.

The survey found candidates most commonly funded SQE study through personal savings (41%), while others self-funded in other ways, including commonly by working at the same time (21%), or a student loan (13%). Around two-fifths (39%) said the SQE training was paid by their employer, while 16% said they received a loan or gift from family or friends.

Candidates were asked how much the SQE training and materials required to complete the qualification had cost them (or was going to cost them) personally. This is excluding the costs of sitting the assessments. There was a range of prices mentioned, including some who did not have to pay anything, all the way through to candidates who spent over £20,000. No one price point particularly dominated. The most common amount paid was between £1,000-£4,999, with around a quarter of candidates reporting this amount (24%). Only around a fifth (21%) said training and materials had cost (or was set to cost) them £10,000 or more.

Costs were heavily affected by the form of study undertaken - for example, candidates who did degrees incorporating SQE training reported higher costs (41% reported a cost of £10,000 or more), which is to be expected as law degree tuition fees for the 2024 to 2025 cohort were at £9,535 per year. The wide range of different costs helps to emphasise that SQE training options can indeed be found at a range of price points as intended by the reforms.

Qualitative interviews provided further insight around the challenges of self-funding SQE preparatory training. Candidates who found funding the SQE preparatory training easy usually cited being sponsored in some way by an employer. However, for those where this was not an option, funding SQE study was difficult unless they were independently wealthy or had parents or family to help them pay for it. Candidates without this support mentioned struggling with debt and struggling to pay, with some stating that they had had to delay sitting the SQE as a result. Some who had had their SQE paid for by employers also mentioned that had this not been the case, they would not have been able to sit the SQE. These findings illustrate that establishing diverse pathways to becoming a solicitor may not alone be enough to remove artificial barriers that could impact diversity in the profession if barriers such as cost are not simultaneously addressed, although it is expected that a more competitive marketplace for SQE will drive costs down.

'I'm still paying for something that I didn't pass...you don't pass even though you studied. You're just sitting there, you're thinking, OK, do I get myself in more debt so I can go do it again? Or do I just leave it and just don't do it until I'm in a better financial position?'

Candidate: 25-34 yrs, failed an SQE exam

Comparing the recorded SQE costs from the 2025 survey to the LPC costs in the 2020-21 academic year reveals that the cost range for the SQE is wider and the overall cost is generally less expensive for candidates. Direct cost comparisons between the SQE and LPC are problematic because the figures are based on different measures of cost and programme structures. Due to this any comparison between candidate SQE and LPC costs must be taken with caution. The first limitation of the comparison is the SQE figures show what candidates personally paid for training and therefore reflect employer contributions; LPC figures are the advertised UK full-time course fees and do not account for employer funding. Consequently, SQE can understate total training costs, while LPC may overstate candidates' out-of-pocket burden.

The second limitation is that the course structures also differ. The LPC is always a standalone qualification with clearly advertised fees, whereas some SQE training is embedded within integrated degree programmes, raising overall costs via broader tuition and fees. This further complicates direct cost comparisons.

As reported, the average LPC course cost for UK full-time students in 2020 was £12,396.32, with the lowest at £9,000. The survey did not provide an average cost for SQE training, but it did reveal that 59% of candidates spent less than £5,000 on their preparatory courses. Adding the examination costs of £4,790, most candidates appear to have paid less than the average LPC cost. However, among candidates without employer support, the percentage spending less than £5,000 decreased to 46%. This suggests that these candidates experienced higher out-of-pocket expenses, which are often comparable to or slightly below the headline LPC figures. Importantly, there is no comparable data to show how much LPC candidates personally paid, given the difference in [reporting approaches](http://www.chambers.com) [<http://www.chambers.com>].

Examination costs

The fees for sitting SQE1 are £1,888 and for SQE2 are £2,902 for assessments booked from September 2024 until August 2025. These are separate additional costs to training costs. All stakeholder groups were asked whether they agreed that the fees for sitting the SQE are reasonable.

Candidates were least positive about this aspect of the SQE, with only 10% agreeing the fees are reasonable (net negative of -73%), the lowest agreement level across all statements covered in the survey. This is also a lower level of agreement than was reported for the 2022 cohort (25%), though again, as previously discussed, this is largely influenced by the different profile of candidates when SQE was first introduced. Candidates who had failed an SQE exam were less likely to agree that the fees were reasonable than those who had not failed an SQE exam (8% vs. 13%).

Training providers also scored negatively overall, with 7 of the 28 agreeing that the fees for sitting the SQE are reasonable (16 out of 28 disagreed). Employers were much more positive than other stakeholders on this issue, with around half of law firm employers and non-law firm legal employers agreeing the fees for sitting SQE are reasonable (50% and 47% respectively). The result for law firm employers represents an increase compared with 2022 (50% in 2025 vs. 21% in 2022).

It should be noted that although candidates were dissatisfied about SQE costs, this is an issue that was also present under the LPC route. As mentioned earlier in this section, costs under the SQE seem to be, similar, or lower than the LPC overall, though a true comparison is not possible here.

In addition, SQE candidates with no experience of the LPC are less likely than the other groups to have a point of comparison to benchmark SQE examination costs against. This may also explain their lower levels of agreement compared to the 2022 cohort. Concerns about the costs of sitting the SQE could undermine objectives to remove barriers to entry and disproportionately affect disadvantaged groups. However, there were no significant differences by ethnicity, school background or parental occupation background in response to this statement in the survey.

Table 19 Levels of agreement with the statement 'The fees for sitting the SQE are reasonable' by stakeholder group

Candidates - 2025	Candidates - 2022	Law firms - 2025	Law firms - 2022	Non-law firms - 2025	Training providers - 2025
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Base	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (1852)	Eligible for SQE1 or SQE2 (347)	All (365)	All (104)	All (85)	All (28)
Agree	10%*	25%	50%	21%	47%	7/28
Neither	6%	13%	22%	27%	21%	5/28
Disagree	83%*	62%	22%*	48%	21%	16/28
Net	-73%*	-37%	28%*	-27%	26%	-22%

Source: candidate survey 2025/2022, employer survey 2025/2022 and training provider survey 2025

Note: Columns may not total to 100% as don't know responses not shown and rounding to the nearest integer

* denotes significant change between the previous evaluation's results.

In qualitative interviews, candidates reiterated their feelings that the fees for sitting SQE were unreasonable, citing it being expensive as a one-off cost, but compounded further due to the volume of candidates having to resit and pay multiple times.

'The upfront fee in and of itself is pretty extortionate. What makes it worse is that if you fail, you have to pay the full fee again, not even a discounted fee.'

Candidate: 16-24 yrs, failed an SQE exam

Some other stakeholders expressed concern about the training costs of the SQE in qualitative interviews. Despite evidence that training costs have not increased under the SQE reforms, other stakeholders considered costs to be the biggest barrier to some from entering the profession.

Overall confidence in QWE

[] Chapter summary

Under the previous qualification system, candidates had to complete a two-year period of recognised training to qualify, typically staying with a single employer for this. QWE replaced this model with a flexible two-year requirement that can be split across up to four organisations, aiming to widen access and broaden practical experience.

Stakeholders were asked the extent to which they agreed with six statements that covered key objectives of QWE. These are linked to the overarching objectives of providing greater assurance of consistent high standards at the point of admission as a solicitor and establishing new and diverse pathways to qualifying. The statements cover:

- clarity of candidate requirements
- clarity of organisational requirements
- development of day-one competence
- widening the range of experience providers
- removing artificial barriers to entry
- promoting diversity at entry.

The results for these six statements have been aggregated (taking the average of each 5-point scale, where 1 is 'strongly disagree' and 5 is 'strongly agree'), to provide a composite confidence score that helps assess overall confidence in QWE.

All stakeholder groups expressed positive views that QWE was performing well against its objectives, with average scores above the neutral point of 3. Though candidates' confidence has decreased since 2022 (from 3.8 to 3.4).

Law firm employers reported an increase in confidence (from 3.3 to 3.5) since 2022. Firsthand experience hosting QWE opportunities were found to shape employer perceptions; those with direct QWE hosting experience showed higher scores (3.7 in 2025, up from 3.3) than those without (3.5 in 2025, previously 2.8). The gap between these two subgroups is narrowing, suggesting that familiarity with QWE continues to build, even among firms that have not yet hosted any.

[] 2025 Overall QWE confidence scores

As with the 'Overall confidence in the SQE' section of the report, confidence scores are used to gauge perceptions of QWE's performance against its objectives by averaging responses to specific statements. The combined score therefore gives a concise indicator of how confidently each stakeholder group feels QWE is performing against those objectives.

Each statement is assessed individually in the subsequent sections of the report.

The average combined QWE score (out of five) reported by each group was similar for candidates, law firm employers, and non-law firm legal employers (all in the 3.4 to 3.5 range), showing that all stakeholder groups felt that the QWE was performing well against its objectives.

Table 20 Overall QWE confidence scores in 2025

	Average combined QWE score
Candidates	3.4
Law firm legal employers	3.5
Non-law firm legal employers	3.5

Source: candidate survey 2025 and employer survey 2025.

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Comparing scores in 2025 and 2022

Compared with 2022, candidate confidence declined slightly, while law firm employer confidence edged up. As noted in the limitations section, wave on wave comparisons should be interpreted with caution due to cohort differences. The 2022 candidate sample included more qualified lawyers that do not need to do QWE, and a higher share of candidates granted SQE exemptions compared with the 2025 cohort. The 2025 survey also achieved a larger candidate base than 2022, which may contribute to observed differences.

Table 21 Overall QWE confidence scores compared to 2022

	2022	2025
Candidates	3.8	3.4
Law firm employers	3.3	3.5

Source: candidate survey 2025, employer survey 2025 and training provider survey 2025

Although they were not reported separately in 2022 due to a low base size, non-law legal firm employers in 2025 reported an average score of 3.5. This closely aligns with the overall law firm employers' score.

Law firm employers - both those with and without experience hosting QWE - saw higher confidence scores in 2025 compared with 2022. However, the extent of this increase in confidence was larger among law firms that had not hosted QWE.

Table 22 Law firm employers QWE confidence scores

	2022	2025
Have hosted QWE	3.3	3.7
Have not hosted QWE	2.8	3.5

Source: employer survey 2025/2022.

While law firm employers that have not hosted QWE remained slightly less positive than those with hosting experience, the gap in scores between the two groups has narrowed. This may indicate a growing understanding or appreciation of QWE, even among those without first hand exposure.

Attitudes towards QWE among candidates varied by demographic subgroups, with some subgroups having more positive views of QWE. In particular, candidates who were aged 25-34, were of an Asian/Asian British ethnic background, reported no disability, or lived outside the UK at the time of the survey tended to have more favourable views of QWE. Table 23 to Table 27 illustrate these variations.

Table 23 Candidates overall QWE confidence scores by gender

	Mean score
Male (a)	3.4
Female (b)	3.4

Source: 2025 candidate survey. Letters (a, b, c, d and e.) after a mean score indicate a significant difference within the same subgroup compared to the row assigned that letter.

Table 24 Candidates overall QWE confidence scores by age group

	Mean score
16 - 24 (a)	3.3
25 - 34 (b)	3.5a
35 - 44 (c)	3.4
45+ (d)	3.5

Source: 2025 candidate survey. Letters (a, b, c, d and e.) after a mean score indicate a significant difference within the same subgroup compared to the row assigned that letter.

Table 25 Candidates overall QWE confidence scores by ethnicity

	Mean score
Asian (a)	3.5b
Black (b)	3.3
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups (c)	3.5
White (d)	3.4
Other (e)	3.3

Source: 2025 candidate survey. Letters (a, b, c, d and e.) after a mean score indicate a significant difference within the same subgroup compared to the row assigned that letter.

Table 26 Candidates overall QWE confidence scores by SQE exam status

	Mean score
Failed an exam (a)	3.3
Never failed an exam (b)	3.5a

Source: 2025 candidate survey. Letters (a, b, c, d and e.) after a mean score indicate a significant difference within the same subgroup compared to the row assigned that letter.

Table 27 Candidates overall QWE confidence scores by country

	Mean score
UK (a)	3.4
Outside the UK (b)	3.6 a

Source: 2025 candidate survey. Letters (a, b, c, d and e.) after a mean score indicate a significant difference within the same subgroup compared to the row assigned that letter.

These differences hold true both at an overall level and when examining the individual QWE confidence statements.

As these subgroup differences are observed across all individual QWE confidence statements, they are summarised here and not repeated at each confidence statement. This is to avoid repetition in the chapters that follow.

Perceptions and Experiences of QWE



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[] Chapter summary

This chapter explores the results for individual statements that contribute to the overall QWE confidence score that relate specifically to the QWE's first objective to provide greater assurance of consistent high standards at the point of admission as a solicitor. These statements focus on whether:

- the requirements candidates need to meet to complete QWE are clear
- the requirements organisations need to meet to confirm QWE are clear
- QWE helps candidates develop the competences they need to practise effectively as a solicitor on day one of practice.

Candidates, law firm employers and non-law firm legal employers were largely positive regarding these aspects of the reforms. There is a high level of agreement that the QWE develops the competences needed to practise effectively as a solicitor, demonstrating growing trust in the new system's ability to prepare solicitors for practice.

In particular, stakeholders cited the practical and immersive experiences candidates gain from QWE. Moreover, there were largely positive or neutral perceptions in terms of the clarity of QWE requirements among candidates and law firm employers. The level of confidence for these statements have remained stable or in some cases improving since the 2022 evaluation.

Despite this positive assessment from all stakeholder groups, some uncertainty persists regarding QWE's ability to consistently develop competence. This is particularly evident among law firm employers with less experience of hosting QWE and candidates who have not yet passed the SQE.

Employers also expressed concerns that, under the new system, candidates could spend as little as six months at each of up to four different organisations. They worried that this limited time in each setting would not allow candidates to become fully integrated or to sufficiently develop the competences needed before moving on to the next opportunity.

[] Clarity of requirements

This section examines the extent to which each stakeholder group considered the requirements of QWE to be clear. QWE is designed to be flexible, allowing both candidates and employers to tailor the experience to their needs. And ensures that candidates gain valuable, practical experience while meeting the requirements for qualification as a solicitor.

Candidates undertake two years' full-time or equivalent QWE, which can be completed at up to four different organisations in legal settings. Candidates are also responsible for keeping a record of their work and competences developed and ensuring their QWE is confirmed by a solicitor.

Employers offering QWE must provide candidates with opportunities to gain practical legal experience, and they confirm the candidate's QWE at the end of the period. This involves verifying the duration of the experience, the type of work undertaken, and that it provided the candidate with the opportunity to develop their practical skills. This confirmation is not an assessment of the candidate's competence but rather a record of their experience.

Overall perceptions about the clarity of QWE requirements among candidates, law firm employers and non-law firm legal employers were broadly positive.

[] Overall understanding of QWE requirements

Among candidates that have completed any QWE and employers that currently host or plan to host QWE, the majority felt that the requirements candidates needed to meet to complete QWE were clear. This sentiment was shared by 63% of candidates, 70% of law firm employers and 10 out of 17 non-law firm legal employers.

Candidates were less positive than law firm employers about the clarity of these requirements (48% of candidates, 72% of legal employers and 12 out of 17 non-law firm

legal employers). It is worth noting that about a fifth of candidates (18%) reported 'don't know' at this measure, which may indicate that some candidates did not feel capable of answering.

Table 28 Level of agreement with the statement 'The requirements that candidates need to meet to complete the QWE are clear' by stakeholder group

	Candidates - 2025	Candidates - 2022	Law firms - 2025	Law firms - 2022
Base	Completed any QWE (1261)	Completed any QWE (347)	Currently recruits or plans to recruit for QWE (126)	All (104)
Agree	63%	65%	70%	51%
Neither	11%*	46%	12%	20%
Disagree	17%	15%	9%	25%
Net	46%	50%	61%	26%

Source: candidate survey 2025/2022 and employer survey 2025/2022

Note: Columns may not total to 100% as don't know responses not shown and rounding to the nearest integer

* denotes significant change between the previous evaluations results.

Table 29 Level of agreement with the statement 'The requirements that organisations need to meet to complete the QWE are clear' by stakeholder group

	Candidates - 2025	Candidates - 2022	Law firms - 2025	Law firms - 2022
Base	Completed any QWE (1261)	Completed any QWE (347)	Currently recruits or plans to recruit for QWE (126)	All (104)
Agree	48%	48%	72%	45%
Neither	13%*	21%	10%	19%
Disagree	21%*	16%	9%	30%
Net	27%	32%	63%	15%

Source: candidate survey 2025/2022 and employer survey 2025/2022

Note: Columns may not total to 100% as don't know responses not shown and rounding to the nearest integer

* denotes significant change between the previous evaluations results.

[] QWE confirmation

Confirmation of QWE, the process by which QWE is verified by an employer, is a critical last stage. Difficulties in obtaining confirmation of genuine work experience could delay candidates' qualification and introduce an unjustifiable barrier to qualification. Unlike the previous system, QWE confirmation does not include an assessment of competency, as this aspect is assessed through the SQE. All experience must be confirmed by a solicitor or compliance officer for legal practice.

As outlined earlier in this section, candidates are responsible for ensuring their QWE is confirmed by a solicitor at the end of the period. This involves verifying the duration of the experience, the type of work undertaken, and that it provided the candidate with the opportunity to develop their practical skills.



Over a third (37%) of law firm employers who had provided QWE opportunities had been approached at some point to confirm a candidate's work experience, while nearly three-fifths (59%) had not reached this point yet. Non-law firm legal employers were more evenly split, with 7 out of 15 employers reporting they had been approached to confirm QWE and the same amount reported they had not. When asked whether they have ever refused to confirm a candidate's QWE, only one law firm employer out of 35 reported doing so, as they believed that the candidate did not fully complete their QWE.

The vast majority of candidates (78%) felt that the process of getting the QWE confirmed was easy. Those who experienced difficulties in getting their QWE confirmed were asked why. Of the 8% who found difficulties getting their QWE confirmed, most candidates indicated that providers did not understand the requirements they themselves needed to meet (57%), while nearly one-third (32%) said providers were unclear on what candidates needed to provide to confirm QWE. A further 23% reported being unable to identify a solicitor who could confirm their QWE. Additionally, around one-fifth of candidates (21%) found it difficult to contact the relevant individual or organisation with whom they had completed their QWE.

Findings from qualitative interviews corroborated these findings, suggesting that candidates who completed QWE through structured training arrangements or existing connections generally found the confirmation process straightforward. This may have been because administrative tasks were often handled for them.

However, a few candidates expressed confusion about the QWE process, mentioning a lack of certainty among themselves and their employers about what qualifies as QWE. These candidates perceived existing guidance and support as inadequate and suggested this hindered their ability to confirm their work experience. Again, this demonstrates how lack of awareness and clarity around the reforms can act as a direct barrier to qualification, as well as undermining wider confidence, as discussed in earlier chapters. However, overall, the findings around the confirmation of QWE, and clarity of the requirements, were positive.

'My supervisor was completely ignorant of what the SQE is about. And he thought that signing off on my qualifying work experience basically would somehow put him in trouble... this is a breakdown of communication with solicitors between the SRA and solicitors. They don't know that the SRA does not obligate them to train me. I had to educate my employers, and I was faced with serious resistance.'

Candidate: 45-54 yrs, white, sat and failed SQE1 or SQE2

'It's pretty straightforward, I was connected with someone at the university and they confirmed it, they were very helpful'.

Candidate: 24-35 yrs, white, passed both SQE1 and SQE2

[] Use of the SRA's materials for QWE guidance

The SRA provides a training template for recording QWE, helping aspiring solicitors to document their work experience, reflect on their development, and identify any gaps in their competences. Over a third (38%) of candidates who had completed any QWE said they had used the template and three-quarters (75%) of these candidates perceived the templates to be useful. Candidates suggested that more could be done by the SRA for employers on QWE guidance and support.

During qualitative interviews candidates reported struggling to successfully inform employers about the QWE process, especially what was and was not included for sign offs. This issue appeared to stem from a perceived lack of SRA guidance around the QWE journey, despite information on the signing off process being available on the SRA's SQE website.

Focus group sessions with employers highlighted that those who have engaged with QWE training perceived the SRA's training template to be reassuring for assessing training quality, as well as guiding tailored training for areas that candidates still need exposure on.

'The diary [lets me] know [what] they have actually done. For me it's [showing me] that exposure to the work [that] I can build on for [candidates] to be better.'

Law firm employer: has current or previous experience hosting QWE

Understanding the information sources employers use to learn about their role in the QWE process, and how useful they find them, helps assess their knowledge of the QWE confirmation process. It also reveals their awareness of what is expected of candidates while studying. Just over half of law firm employers (56%) and non-law firm legal employers (51%) reported using information sources to further their understanding of their role in supporting candidates through their QWE.

A third of law firm employers (34%) and almost a quarter (23%) of non-law firm legal employers used the SRA's SQE webpage. This information source was used significantly more by law firm employers who have previously hosted QWE (64%) compared to other types of information sources as expected.

Table 30 Information sources employers used to help them understand their role in the QWE process

	Law firms - 2025	Non-law firms - 2025
Base	Offers or plans to offer QWE (353)	Offers or plans to offer QWE (81)
Used any information source	56%	51%
SRA's SQE webpage	34%	23%
Legal press sources e.g., newsletters, magazines	18%	12%
Training provider's website	8%	6%
Sharing knowledge between staff	7%	6%
Attending meetings/conferences	6%	1%
Other SRA engagement eg email, courses	4%	5%
Feedback from students or candidates	3%	2%
General research eg Google	3%	1%
Communications from training providers	2%	2%
Sharing knowledge with other employers	2%	2%
None of these	44%	49%

Source: employer survey 2025

Most law firm employers that had used the SQE webpage reported they found it useful (95%), as did 18 of the 19 non-law firm legal employers. However, just under a quarter of all law firm employer users reported challenges in accessing key information about both the SQE and QWE:

- 23% reported that they struggled to find out how QWE and SQE work
- 22% had difficulty locating guides for employers
- 21% were unsure about SQE course content requirements.

Table 31 Employers' engagement with information sources

	Law firms - 2025	Non-law firms - 2025
Base	Used SRA webpage (123)	Used SRA webpage (19)
Agree the SRA's SQE webpage is useful	95%	18/19

Source: employer survey 2025

Insights from the employer focus groups corroborated survey findings around information sources and support. Several employers highlighted that the support and guidance from the SRA has been helpful in broadening their understanding of their role in supporting candidates undertaking QWE, as well as staying in the loop with wider SQE reforms and updates.

‘There’s no shortage of support materials available. If you want to go out and find it, [there’s] almost too much and it did take me quite a while to get my head around it.’

Law firm employer

Some employers called for clearer guidance on QWE, indicating that refining the clarity of information available may improve employer engagement. Additionally, both employer groups commonly reported that they do not use any information sources to learn about QWE (44% of law firm employers, 49% of non-law firm legal employers). This suggests increasing efforts to promote QWE-related information, and SRA sources, would help encourage employers to engage more with the existing QWE guidance on the SRA’s website.

[] Candidate experience of QWE

Overall, candidates’ experiences of QWE have been the most positive aspect of the SQE reforms. The vast majority (87%) reported they were satisfied overall with the QWE they had completed. Most candidates were also positive about the supervision they received during their QWE, with 78% satisfied overall. Satisfaction levels have remained fairly consistent since 2022, as although there was a 5 percentage point decrease, this was not statistically significant.

Table 32 Candidates’ satisfaction with QWE and supervision

	Candidates - 2025 Completed any QWE (1261)	Candidates - 2022 Completed any QWE (292)
Base		
Satisfied with the QWE they have completed	87%	89%
Satisfaction with supervision received during QWE	78%	83%

Source: candidate survey 2025/2022

Candidates expanded on their positive experiences of QWE during the qualitative interviews, reflecting on the ‘immersive’ nature of their experience, and their appreciation of the strong mentorship, skill development opportunities, and flexibility it provided. Furthermore, some candidates reported that completing QWE boosted their confidence in qualifying as solicitors. And several noted that their legal interests shifted as a result of hands-on experience gained during their QWE.

‘It provided me with the tools to be the solicitor that I want to be in the future.’

Candidate: 25-34 yrs, other ethnicity, sat and failed SQE1 or SQE2

‘The flexibility to be able to do [QWE] at more than one organisation...this was a game changer for me.’

Candidate: 16-24 yrs, Asian/ Asian British, sat and failed SQE1 or SQE2

Many candidates felt QWE gave them a more positive outlook towards practising law after qualification. A contributing factor was QWE having helped them to better understand the broader legal landscape, something an exam alone could not provide. However, some felt the value of QWE depended on the employer and team involved.

‘It’s helped me a lot. I was doing a lot of the work that I will be doing early on in my career as a solicitor, so I was getting exposure very quickly, which is definitely going to help me.’



Candidate: 25-34 yrs, white ethnicity, passed both SQE1 and SQE2

'I'm pretty confident, I mean it's two years of training, so by the end of the two years, if I'm not ready to be a solicitor, then something's wrong.'

Candidate: 25-34 yrs, white ethnicity, passed both SQE1 and SQE2

'I think it comes from how reasonable your employer is and how well they understand working while you're learning. [My employer] is really understanding and I think that's really important. I work in a very good team, which has prepared me for what I would need to do for becoming a solicitor.'

Candidate: 16-24 yrs, mixed ethnicity, passed both SQE1 and SQE2

Candidates were asked what advice they would give to someone about to start looking for QWE. The main themes that emerged from the interviews were to carefully research potential host firms and to consider factors such as time ringfenced for study (eg study days), company culture and values, available support from colleagues, and the amount and type of exposure to legal practice before committing to a particular QWE opportunity, to ensure experiences meet their preferences and expectations. Many recommended contacting junior employees at host firms to understand their experiences with these aspects of QWE.

Linked to candidates' suggestion that time allocated to study was a factor to consider when looking for QWE employers, employers who participated in the focus groups raised concerns about the potential stress that trainees encounter while balancing QWE alongside studying for the SQE, especially when self-funding their studies. A few suggested that the desire to qualify quickly may lead to candidates overextending themselves, which can impact the quality of work delivered by trainees in their day-to-day work.

[] Competence

The SRA's Statement of Solicitor Competence is a framework that sets out the skills, knowledge, and behaviours required for solicitors to perform their role effectively. The Statement covers four key areas, each of which reflects the essential aspects of a solicitor's responsibilities and professional development:

- **Ethics, professionalism, and judgment:** The ability to uphold the rule of law and act with integrity, including an understanding and application of ethical principles, making sound judgments and maintaining professionalism in all aspects of legal practice.
- **Technical legal practice:** The core legal knowledge and skills required to provide effective legal advice and representation, including legal research, drafting, negotiation and advocacy.
- **Working with others:** The ability to collaborate effectively with colleagues, clients and other stakeholders. This includes strong communication skills, the ability to build and maintain professional relationships, and a commitment to diversity and inclusion.
- **Managing themselves and their work:** The ability to organise and prioritise their workload, meet deadlines, and maintain high standards of performance.

It is important to note that exposure to all areas of the Statement of Solicitor Competence during QWE is not mandatory, as competence is assessed through the SQE. The role of QWE is to provide practical experience designed to enrich and reinforce candidates' learning, supporting their development and readiness for practice, rather than serving as the definitive measure of their competence.

Candidates and employers were asked which element(s) of the Statement of Solicitor Competence were covered in the QWE they experienced or hosted. The majority of candidates (80%) and employers (Law firm employers: 92%; non-law firm legal employers: 13/15) felt the QWE covered all elements of the Statement of Solicitor Competence. These results represented increases on 2022 levels (candidates: 67%; law firm employers: 65%).

For those who were not exposed to all elements of the Statement of Solicitor Competence, the most common reason across both stakeholder groups was the perception that the QWE either undertaken or hosted was too specialist in focus due to the nature of the job role. This was mentioned by 48% of candidates who said their QWE didn't cover all aspects of the Statement, and 43% of law firm employers who said not all competences were covered.

(Please note, the base size for non-law firm legal employers is too small to report the findings on).

In some cases, it was clear from both employers and individuals that this more focused approach was a deliberate strategy to ensure candidates were developing competences for a specific role. For example, 12% of law firm employers who said not all competences were covered felt it was not appropriate to expose candidates to some areas of the Statement of Solicitor Competence.

The same proportion (12%) felt that candidates chose to complete QWE with them to be exposed to specific skills such as advocacy, not all sections of the Statement. This finding was also echoed by candidates, among whom a fifth (22%) highlighted that their QWE was focused on developing specific skills. Overall, these results demonstrate the flexibility of QWE, allowing candidates and employers to tailor their experience to align with individual career goals and organisational strengths. This is rather than requiring exposure to all areas of the Statement of Solicitor Competence.

Other key reasons cited by law firm employers (31%) included not having the resources to expose candidates to all sections. While candidates mentioned not yet having completed enough QWE (14%), or their QWE to date not being long enough in duration (11%) to gain exposure to all elements.

Table 33 Candidates' and law firm employers' perspectives towards the QWE's ability to develop or expose candidates to all sections of the Competence Statement

	Candidates - 2025 Completed any QWE (1261)	Candidates - 2022 Completed any QWE (347)	Law firms - 2025 All (365)	Law firms - 2022 All (104)
Base				
Reports that QWE develops / exposes candidates to all sections of the competence statement	80%	67%	92%*	65%

Source: candidate survey 2025/2022 and employer survey 2025/2022

* denotes significant change between the previous evaluations results.

Consistent with the 2022 evaluation, candidates had high levels of confidence that QWE helps candidates develop the competences they need to practise effectively as a day one solicitor (73% of candidates). They were even more positive when reflecting whether they had personally seen these results, with 87% (similar to 88% in 2022) agreeing that their QWE helped them personally to develop these competences. These results further evidence that candidates perceive themselves to be developing the competences they need to practise, even if these do not cover all aspects of the Solicitor Statement of Competence.

Examples from qualitative interviews highlighted how participants developed these competences. This included actively contributing as employees rather than merely observing or shadowing others and gaining exposure to various legal areas, which helped clarify their interests. Beyond technical skills, candidates also felt QWE had helped prepare them for the interpersonal aspects of the workplace, including navigating team dynamics and learning to pick up on social cues.

Table 34 Level of agreement with the statement 'My QWE, including work experience not yet confirmed as QWE, has helped me develop the competences I need to practise effectively as a solicitor' by stakeholder group

	Candidates - 2025 Completed any QWE (1261)	Candidates - 2022 Completed any QWE (347)
Base		
Agree	87%	88%

Neither	6%	6%
Disagree	4%*	1%
Net	83%	87%

Source: candidate survey 2025/2022

Note: Columns may not total to 100% as don't know responses not shown and rounding to the nearest integer

* denotes significant change between the previous evaluations results.

It is however notable that employers, who are the ones providing QWE and are more qualified to assess what it takes to practise effectively, scored lower on this metric of whether QWE helps candidates develop the competences needed to practice effectively (46% of law firm employers and 40% of non-law firm legal employers agreeing). That being said, a large proportion of employers were neutral on this statement (25% of law-firm employers and 34% of non-law firm legal employers), and overall, there were low levels of disagreement (15% and 11% respectively).

However, when looking at agreement with this statement amongst law firm employers and non-law firm legal employers that have experience hosting QWE, the picture is more positive. For instance, 61% and 60% respectively agree that the QWE helps candidates develop the competences they need to practise effectively, and a smaller proportion were neutral on this statement (17% and 27%).

Some employers in the focus groups felt the confirmation of a candidate's QWE could feel more like an acknowledgement of attendance rather than a direct assessment of competence. Other stakeholders shared concerns during interviews that while QWE was viewed as essential to real-world learning, its lack of standardisation poses a challenge to ensuring consistent, high-quality outcomes. These findings may reflect a broader misunderstanding about the intended purpose of QWE sign off, not as a judgement of an individual's competence, but rather as a record that it has been completed.

However, employers also recognised the strengths of the new system and acknowledged that the purpose of confirming QWE is not to assess competence but to document practical experience. They appreciated that the assessment of competence is systematic and objective in the form of the SQE exams, which provides greater confidence in the fairness and reliability of the qualification process, while variation in delivery of QWE is expected.

'QWE is not standardised. The calibre of QWE candidates receive will largely dictate their ability'.

Other stakeholder

Table 35 Level of agreement with the statement 'QWE helps candidates develop the competences they need to practise effectively as a solicitor on day one of practice' by stakeholder group

	Candidates - 2025	Candidates - 2022	Law firms - 2025	Law firms - 2022
Base	Completed any QWE (1261)	Completed any QWE (347)	All (365)	All (104)
Agree	73%	73%	46%	46%
Neither	10%	13%	25%	18%
Disagree	10%*	6%	15%*	31%
Net	63%	67%	31%*	15%

Source: candidate survey 2025/2022 and employer survey 2025/2022

Note: Columns may not total to 100% as don't know responses not shown and rounding to the nearest integer

* denotes significant change between the previous evaluations results.



Employers were also asked about recruitment practices following qualification and whether they would consider employing newly qualified solicitors who did QWE elsewhere - an important indicator of confidence in QWE in preparing solicitors for practice. Most law firm employers (82%) and non-law firm legal employers (78%) said they would, a finding that has increased sharply since 2022 (39%). Law firm employers with experience hosting QWE were more likely to report this (91%).

Focus groups revealed some mixed perceptions about the recruitment benefits among employers. Some law firm employers felt the flexibility candidates now have to complete parts of QWE at numerous firms was a positive. However, some also mentioned concerns around not knowing the nature and quality of their previous experience, due to candidates being able to complete parts of their QWE at different firms.

‘There’s more flexibility for trainees to pursue specific areas of the field if they know where they want to specialise in’

Employer: Law firm employer

[QWE pathways](#)

[] Chapter summary

This chapter examines the extent to which QWE is supporting the objective of increasing flexible, accessible and diverse pathways to becoming a qualified solicitor. It explores results for the following statements, capturing perceptions of whether QWE will:

- lead to a more diverse range of organisations offering work experience to aspiring solicitors
- help remove artificial and unjustifiable barriers into entering the profession
- help promote diversity at the point of entry to the solicitor profession.

Broadly, candidates and employers felt positively towards the increased flexibility and accessibility of QWE opportunities, with many candidates valuing the ability to tailor their QWE to align with their projected career goals. This perceived flexibility closely aligns with the objective of removing artificial barriers to entry, as candidates can pursue different routes according to their circumstances.

Most QWE opportunities were offered by law firms that provided period of recognised trainings under the previous qualification system. However, many candidates also secured work experience in legal roles outside of law firms, indicating early progress towards the objective of enabling a more diverse range of organisations to offer QWE.

Employers reported a range of perceived benefits of hosting QWE, such as it being an opportunity to grow internal talent and diversify recruitment. More employers have started to offer longer structured QWE opportunities or funded preparatory training courses for SQE assessments. Such initiatives from employers may contribute to reducing barriers to candidates trying to obtain QWE opportunities by increasing the availability and accessibility of placements. This is particularly for those who may not have existing connections within the legal sector.

Nearly one third of candidates found it easy to secure QWE opportunities. Those who struggled did so owing to competition for opportunities, limited understanding of QWE among legal service providers, and insufficient guidance on independently navigating the job market for QWE opportunities.

Survey and qualitative data also revealed disparities across demographics. And while some candidates benefitted from existing roles or networks, younger or less connected candidates faced greater challenges accessing opportunities, suggesting there are still some barriers to entering the profession. These disparities will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

[] Whether the introduction of QWE will lead to a more diverse range of organisations offering work experience

Candidates being able to choose from a more diverse range of QWE providers has the potential to increase accessibility to those who may have previously faced barriers to entering the profession by offering a wider pool of opportunities in varied settings. For employers, particularly those outside the traditional training framework, the reforms present an opportunity to engage with a wider talent pool and contribute to diversifying the solicitor profession.

[] Perception of diversity of QWE opportunities

All stakeholder groups mostly agreed that QWE will lead to a more diverse range of organisations offering work experience. However, compared to 2022, candidates were less likely to agree with the idea that QWE will achieve this objective (60% in 2025 vs. 70% in 2022). The proportion of law firm employers that agreed with this statement was similar over these two periods (55% in 2025 vs. 54% in 2022). Employers who had already hosted QWE were more likely than those who had not to agree that QWE will lead to a more diverse range of organisations offering work experience (70% vs. 50%).

Table 36 Whether the introduction of QWE will lead to a more diverse range of organisations offering work experience to aspiring solicitors

	Candidates - 2025	Candidates - 2022	Law firms - 2025	Law firms - 2022	Non-law firms - 2025
Base	Completed any QWE (1261)	Completed any QWE (347)	All (365)	All (104)	All (86)
Agree	60%	70%	55%	54%	51%
Neither	13%	14%	22%	23%	27%
Disagree	16%*	7%	9%	15%	7%
Net	44%*	63%	46%	39%	44%

Source: employer survey 2025, candidate survey 2025, SQE survey 2022

Note: Columns may not total to 100% as don't know responses not shown and rounding to the nearest integer

* denotes significant change between the previous evaluations results.

[] QWE opportunities by organisation type

Under the old qualification system, candidates had to complete a two-year period of recognised training. However, acquiring this was difficult for some, such as those who came from a less 'prestigious' academic background or had caring responsibilities, due to the limited number of participating law firm employers. This meant that a candidate's chance of success was heavily influenced by the availability and suitability of opportunities to gain a two-year period of recognised training. QWE is more flexible for candidates, allowing them to complete opportunities in a wider range of organisations, in their own time, and in more than one setting.

Evidence from the candidate survey suggests that a diverse range of employer types were hosting QWE opportunities. The most common type of organisation that candidates completed (or

planned to complete) their QWE opportunities with was still law firm employers (81%), though other types of employers hosting QWE included private sector or commercial organisations (30%), public sector or not-for-profit organisations (16%), and student law clinics (9%). Candidates are able to complete QWE at more than one employer which is why figures do not total to 100%.

Table 37 Where candidates' QWE opportunities took place

Base	Candidates - 2025 Completed at least some QWE or plan to (1604)
Law firms	81%
Private sector/ commercial organisations	30%
Public sector/ not for profit organisations	16%
Student law clinics	9%

Source: candidate survey 2025

[] **Solicitor apprenticeships**

Another alternative route to become qualification is the solicitor apprenticeship scheme. This five to six year programme combines paid work experience in a legal setting with study that covers key legal knowledge and skills, and apprentices must sit and pass both parts of the SQE.

Upon completion, apprentices receive a level 7 qualification (equivalent to a master's degree) and are fully qualified to become a solicitor. In light of recent government changes, the SRA have confirmed that the solicitor's apprenticeship scheme will continue on for individuals 21 years and below, with SQE training and assessment costs covered by the apprenticeship levy fund.

Before this confirmation, focus groups with law firm employers highlighted how the apprenticeship scheme was a highly beneficial route to qualification, with one employer elaborating their hopes for it to continue. The availability of this scheme again expands the range of pathways to becoming a solicitor and opens the profession up to a more diverse pool of candidates.

'If the apprenticeship scheme stops, I think that's a travesty because for the SQE to work, I think that's the only way it will work properly.'

Law firm employer: has current or previous experience hosting QWE and LPC training

[] **Unpaid QWE opportunities**

QWE opportunities can include unpaid roles, such as those with student law clinics or voluntary organisations. While in principle not an issue, it is imperative to understand whether the prevalence of unpaid QWE opportunities could potentially restrict access to qualification for candidates who are unable to work for free while also paying for training. This financial barrier would counteract the SQE objectives of promoting fair and diverse access to the profession by removing artificial and unjustifiable barriers.

Only a small proportion of candidates (8%) reported taking (or planning to take) unpaid QWE, a slight decrease from 2022 (12%). Taking unpaid QWE was less likely among white candidates compared to their counterparts (5% for white candidates, 12% for Asian, 9% for Black, 10% for mixed ethnic groups, and 10% for other ethnic groups). In cases where unpaid QWE was taken or planned, three-quarters (76%) of these candidates said this was for no longer than a year.

The most notable reason for candidates completing unpaid QWE was because they were doing QWE with a student law clinic run by the candidate's training provider (37%), an increase from 2022 (10%). Similarly, more than a fifth (22%) mentioned doing QWE with a voluntary organisation. However, it is worth noting that some candidates in the qualitative interviews expressed they were sacrificing pay to secure QWE due to the competition for places and a lack of available paid QWE.

Under three in ten (28%) candidates doing unpaid QWE said they were doing so because there was a perceived lack of paid QWE opportunities, while just under one-fifth (19%) stated that there was less competition for unpaid QWE opportunities compared to paid opportunities, and a similar proportion of candidates (16%) cited greater availability of unpaid opportunities.

Given the prevalence of these findings, the presence of unpaid QWE opportunities do not seem to be undermining the reform's objectives in promoting fair and diverse access to the profession. Rather, the uptake of candidates carrying out QWE in student law compared to 2022 suggests there is a growing diversification of QWE opportunities available in the market.

[] Requirements candidates need to meet to be accepted onto QWE opportunities

In 2022, it was observed that nearly two thirds of employers required applicants for QWE opportunities to have completed their SQE exams. This requirement may have placed significant constraints on the availability of 'earn as you learn' opportunities for candidates with no prior footing within the legal sector. And limit opportunities that could help remove barriers to entry into the profession and promote wider access.

However, by 2025, the majority of employers had shifted their approach: most law firm employers (54%) and most non-law firm legal employers (13 out of 18) did not require completion of the SQE assessment prior to starting QWE. This change demonstrates a growing willingness among employers to support candidates as they learn on the job, fostering a more inclusive and accessible pathway into the legal profession.

However, in the focus groups, employers expressed concerns about the ability of candidates to successfully balance their training with their employment. They cited negative repercussions seen on their trainees' mental health (discussed later in this chapter).

[] Impact of QWE on employers

QWE was designed to give employers greater flexibility in recruiting and training future solicitors. By enabling candidates to gain QWE in a broader range of settings, the reforms aimed to help employers access a wider, more diverse pool of talent. These changes were intended to allow employers to support candidates as they learn on the job and tailor training to their own business needs.

However, it is important to also assess if there were any unanticipated impacts of the reforms that could negatively affect the sector. This section explores what employers considered as the main impacts of the reforms for their organisations and recruitment practices.

Most employers (82% of legal employers and 80% of non-law legal employers) reported making no changes to their recruitment, employment, or training practices, as a result of the SQE reforms. The absence of significant changes may be attributed in part to the fact that many employers have not yet hosted QWE opportunities. Indeed, the proportion reduced to 61% among law firm employers that had done so.

In addition, it could reflect the relatively low administrative burden associated with hosting QWE for candidates. This allows employers to accommodate these opportunities without necessitating substantial adjustments to their existing recruitment or training practices.

Figure 1 Whether employers changed their recruitment, employment, or training practice as a result of SRA published information.

	Law firms - 2025 Have not hosted QWE (267)	Law firms - 2025 Hosted QWE (92)	Non-law firms - 2025 Have not hosted QWE (64)	Non-law firms - 2025 Hosted QWE (15)
Base				
Yes - has made changes to recruitment, employment or training practices or procedures	10%	38%	9%	4/15
No - has not made changes to recruitment, employment or training practices or procedures	89%	61%	89%	10/15

Don't know 1% 1% 2% 1/15

Source: employer survey 2025

[] Challenges and benefits of the reforms for employers

Most law firm and non-law firm legal employers said they had not yet experienced any notable challenges (69% and 77%, respectively) or benefits (73% and 79%) from QWE. Among the few who did report challenges, concerns varied by employer type. Law firm employers most cited worries about the quality of candidates and training (8%). While non-law firm employers were more likely to cite not understanding QWE requirements (6%), a concern also shared by some law firm employers (5%).

Table 38 Challenges felt by employers as a result of QWE

	Law firms - 2025	Law firms - 2025	Non-law firms - 2025	Non-law firms - 2025
Base	All (365)	Hosted QWE (92)	All (85)	Hosted QWE (15)
Concerns about the quality of candidates/training	8%	14%	1%	1/15
Not understanding the requirements of QWE	5%	3%	6%	4/15
QWE is too burdensome	5%	12%	5%	2/15
QWE is too expensive	3%	12%	0%	0/15
Have not experienced any challenges because of QWE	69%	47%	77%	5/15

Source: employer survey 2025

In terms of the challenges employers faced, a few reported they believed there was a lack of clear internal and external expectations for employers and candidates alike. In the focus groups, employers also acknowledged candidates' eagerness to complete SQE as quickly as possible, leading to simultaneously undertaking QWE while studying for SQE.

A few employees raised concerns that pursuing both requirements affected candidates' QWE performance, as well as their overall wellbeing. One employer believed this sense of urgency to become qualified as soon as possible stemmed from financial concerns of paying off student finance loans on top of any self-funding for the SQE.

'[Candidates are] coming to us, having finished their degree, with £40,000 of debt - that's why they want to get on with it.'

Law firm employer: has current or previous experience hosting QWE and LPC training

In terms of benefits of QWE, the most frequently mentioned was the opportunity to design more varied QWE experiences to attract a broader talent pool (8% of law firm employers; 6% of non-law legal employers).

Some law firm employers (4%) also valued the enhanced ability to invest in and upskill current staff through QWE, whereas they would have previously had to hire externally. Many candidates reported completing QWE in their existing legal roles, aligning with the motivations of employers who viewed QWE as a tool to invest in and retain internal talent.

Table 39 Benefits felt by employers as a result of QWE

	Law firms - 2025	Law firms - 2025	Non-law firms - 2025	Non-law firms - 2025
Base	All (365)	Hosted QWE (92)	All (85)	Hosted QWE (15)
Ability to design different QWE training to attract a	8%	13%	6%	1/15

more diverse range of candidates

Ability to develop existing employees	4%	9%	1%	1/15
Allows for working while training/ monitoring candidate progress	3%	9%	1%	1/15
Better/ more structured training	2%	5%	2%	1/15
Have not experienced any benefits because of QWE	73%	47%	79%	10/15

Source: employer survey 2025

[] Whether QWE introduction will help remove artificial and unjustifiable barriers to entering the profession

The following section explores whether the introduction of QWE has helped remove artificial and unjustifiable barriers to entering the solicitor profession. It first examines candidates' considerations when choosing QWE opportunities, followed by the ease or difficulty in securing such opportunities.

Understanding what candidates look for, and the accessibility of QWE opportunities that meets their needs, is important for determining whether the reforms are on track in terms of removing artificial or unjustifiable barriers that have previously limited entry to the profession.

Survey answers show that more than two-fifths (44%) of candidates agreed that QWE will help remove artificial and unjustifiable barriers to entering the profession, a lower proportion than found among the 2022 cohort (61%). It is important to note that some candidates in the 2025 cohort may not have fully understood the previous system or the rationale behind the QWE design. This is because they received less communication on the reforms compared to the 2022 cohort, who began their qualification journey just as the changes were implemented. This lack of understanding could explain the difference in survey responses.

The proportion of employers who agreed with this statement was similar to candidates (46% for law firm employers, and 43% for non-law firm employers). There was little change in the result for law firm employers compared with 2022 (46% in 2025 vs. 44% in 2022).

Table 40 Whether, over time, QWE will help remove artificial and unjustifiable barriers to entering the solicitor profession

	Candidates - 2025	Candidates - 2022	Law firms - 2025	Law firms - 2022	Non-law firms - 2025
Base	Completed any QWE (1261)	Completed any QWE (347)	All (365)	All (104)	All (86)
Agree	44%	61%	46%	44%	43%
Neither	15%	15%	24%	20%	25%
Disagree	27%	13%	17%	25%	20%
Net	17%*	48%	29%*	19%	23%

Source: employer survey 2025, candidate survey 2025, SQE survey 2022

Note: Columns may not total to 100% as don't know responses not shown and rounding to the nearest integer

Qualitative interviews found that some candidates perceived the accessibility of QWE opportunities to be similar to the old system's period of recognised trainings. This is due to some law firm employers operating their QWE in a similar style and with similar recruitment processes.

Candidates expressed that, while QWE offered greater flexibility and choice, those with strong academic backgrounds and with prior professional exposure remained at an advantage when securing QWE opportunities.

[] Candidate QWE selection considerations

Candidates who had completed or planned to complete QWE were asked about the perceived importance of various prompted factors which might have influenced decisions when looking for QWE opportunities.

Nearly all factors were considered important (either 'very' or 'slightly') by three-quarters or more of candidates. The factors most commonly perceived as important to candidates were the area of practice (89%), salary (87%), the type of organisation (87%) and provider reputation (86%).

Previous connections with the provider through colleagues, friends, or family was the least important factor (34%). Four-fifths of candidates (80%) considered the length of the provider's QWE opportunity an important factor, indicating that many may not be following a traditional qualification timeline, potentially balancing work, studies, or other responsibilities.

Figure 2 Factors candidates consider slightly or very important to their QWE choices

Candidate survey 2025: C2.1-9 Do/did you find the following factors very important, slightly important, or not at all important when looking for a QWE placement? Base: Respondents who have completed or plan to complete any QWE Total (1604)

[] Ease of finding QWE opportunities

The journey of securing QWE opportunities serves as an important indicator of whether barriers to entry have been reduced and whether a broader range of candidates can access legal work experience. The following findings examine candidates' experiences in securing QWE opportunities, as well as the main challenges and facilitators they encounter. It also explores the perspectives of both candidates and employers, providing insight into the real-world impact of the reforms on the accessibility and inclusivity of the qualification process.

More candidates experienced difficulty finding an opportunity in 2025 than in 2022. However, this could be because the previous cohort included more candidates that were already in roles that qualified as their QWE. Just under a third (32%) of candidates in 2025 found the process easy while approaching two-fifths (37%) found it difficult (compared with 31% and 24% respectively in 2022). Those who had not yet undertaken any QWE were more likely to report difficulties compared to those who had done at least some QWE (76% vs. 28%).

Among candidates who reported ease in securing a QWE opportunity, the majority (71%) attributed this to already being employed by the QWE provider. Other reasons included the availability of opportunities in their local area (12%) and having professional or personal connections within the legal field (12%).

Candidates who found it difficult to secure a QWE opportunity mostly attributed this to high levels of competition (82%). This was a higher proportion than in 2022 (47%), likely because a higher proportion of candidates were already in legal work in the earlier cohort. Candidates who had not yet undertaken QWE were more likely to mention high levels of competition as the reason they found securing a QWE opportunity difficult compared to those who had (88% vs. 78%). Other frequently mentioned barriers included:

- challenging nature of the application process or being unsuccessful in applications (48%)
- difficulties in finding paid QWE opportunities (35%)
- limited provider understanding of QWE (24%)
- difficulties related to location (16%)
- difficulties related to personal circumstances (15%).

Some barriers were less prevalent than in 2022 among those who found securing QWE difficult. One such example was fewer of these candidates mentioning limited provider understanding of QWE (24% in 2025 vs. 30% in 2022).

Overall, though a positive finding, it is unsurprising that understanding of QWE would improve over time. Similarly, candidates in 2025 who found securing QWE difficult were also less likely to mention barriers such as personal circumstances (15% in 2025 vs. 22% in 2022) and finding it hard to secure QWE in their local area (16% in 2025 vs. 30% in 2022).

Candidates' experiences of applying for positions that would count towards their QWE were explored further in qualitative interviews. Many candidates perceived the process of applying to be straightforward as they gained experience through a university or existing work experience, especially as in-house paralegals, who felt they were provided with a better level of structured support and access to relevant information.

'I worked at a telecoms company as a paralegal. My manager agreed to sign off my work experience for the SQE and he found it very simple.'

Candidate: 25-34 yrs, white, passed SQE1 and SQE2

However, building on the survey findings showing a large proportion found the application process challenging, those who struggled mentioned difficulties in navigating QWE applications. In some cases, particularly where candidates sought to gain QWE through their current employer, candidates indicated that they had to educate solicitors or supervisors in their workplace about the QWE process (reiterating issues around the clarity of QWE requirements among employers). Emphasising the issues around QWE opportunities being too competitive, one candidate mentioned having been rejected from multiple QWE providers despite having excellent academic standing; it took them several months to secure work experience with the help of personal connections.

'It is incredibly tough. I came from a very good background having a PhD, and even then I got rejected from over 25 period of recognised training programmes. It took four months [to get an opportunity], but that was [only possible because] someone took a leap of faith in me because of that personal connection.'

Candidate: 25-34 yrs, white, passed SQE1 and SQE2

When asked what advice candidates would give to those looking for QWE, candidates suggested thoroughly researching employers that align with a candidate's desired practice area of law, as well as checking whether employers have adequate support systems for individuals completing SQE. Some candidates who took a long time to secure work experience encouraged others to apply for QWE as early as possible.

While QWE is functioning for most candidates, the insights from the qualitative interviews imply there may still be difficulties in accessing desired opportunities. This is not unique to the solicitor profession and many sectors remain highly competitive, with the number of applicants often outstripping the available positions. While the competition for legal positions for QWE is often intense, this competitive environment can be seen as a positive force, helping to ensure that only the most dedicated and capable candidates enter the profession, ultimately upholding high standards within the field.

Candidates have highlighted that more could be done to make the process of applying for QWE opportunities more transparent and accessible for them.

'I would say definitely research firms and look for what interests you. For me, it was the firm that has a strong [redacted: sector name] department, that's why I applied for that firm specifically because obviously I come from a [redacted: sector name] background.'

Candidate: 16-24 yrs, white, passed both SQE1 and SQE2

'Look for firms which have a history of supporting juniors. Reach out to junior people in the role already. I think having that support is the main thing, so look for that when applying.'

Candidate: 25-34 yrs, white, passed both SQE1 and SQE2

As discussed in a previous chapter, qualitative findings from employers outlined how a few employers were more inclined to recruit candidates who went through the LPC route. A possible explanation to why some candidates who were already not in the workforce struggled to secure their QWE opportunity. While recruitment of SQE candidates is inevitable, the reluctance to recruit these specific candidates now may undermine the reforms objectives to promote diverse pathways into the solicitor profession.

[] Perceptions on whether QWE will help promote diversity at the point of entry to the profession

Stakeholders from all audiences were asked directly whether they felt that, over time, QWE would help promote diversity at the point of entry to the solicitor profession, one of the core objectives of the wider SQE reforms. Overall, two-fifths (43%) of candidates agreed this would be achieved, a lower proportion than the 2022 cohort (57%). Conversely, half of law firm employers agreed with this statement, up from 39% in 2022. A similar proportion of non-law firm legal employers also agreed.

Table 41 Whether, over time, QWE will help promote diversity at the point of entry to the solicitor profession

	Candidates - 2025	Candidates - 2022	Law firms - 2025	Law firms - 2022	Non-law firms - 2025
	Completed any QWE (1261)	Completed any QWE (347)	All (365)	All (104)	All (86)
Base					
Agree	43%*	57%	50%*	39%	51%
Neither	16%	16%	25%	24%	26%
Disagree	26%*	14%	11%*	27%	13%
Net	17%*	43%	39%*	12%	38%

Source: employer survey 2025, candidate survey 2025, SQE survey 2022

Note: Columns may not total to 100% as don't know responses not shown and rounding to the nearest integer

Industry stakeholders were also asked what they perceived the future impact of QWE to be on equality, diversity, and inclusion within the sector. Many industry stakeholders felt they were unable to assess any change at this point, due to current insufficient data on whether a greater proportion of candidates from non-traditional backgrounds were entering the profession as a result of the reforms.

A few industry stakeholders perceived that candidates with personal and professional connections were still at an advantage when it comes to securing quality QWE and had concerns about whether the gap between first-generation law students and those with legal family backgrounds might widen further. One industry stakeholder suggested a partnership with charities, such as

Citizens Advice, to help disseminate information around QWE pathways to those with no prior footing (academically or professionally) in the sector.

The long-term impact of QWE on equality, diversity and inclusion remains uncertain to stakeholders. However, the feedback received highlights the importance of ongoing monitoring and proactive outreach to ensure that opportunities are accessible to candidates from varying backgrounds.

Overall conclusions

Overall conclusions

The following conclusions are based on all the evidence collected within this evaluation as to whether, at the third phase of the SQE evaluation programme, stakeholders believe the SQE reforms are on track to provide:

1. greater assurance of consistent high standards at the point of admission as a solicitor
2. new and diverse pathways to qualifying as a solicitor.

Are the SQE reforms providing greater assurance against the standards objectives?

The forthcoming technical evaluation will specifically assess whether the SQE is functioning as a valid, reliable, and fair assessment. This next phase will provide a closer examination of the technical quality and robustness of the assessment itself. However, in this evaluation, stakeholders were asked about their perceptions regarding whether the SQE reforms would provide greater assurance of high standards at the point of admission as a solicitor.

In 2025, confidence in the SQE reforms achieving this objective was mixed, varying across key stakeholder groups. Candidates had the least confidence, while training providers and employers were more positive about the reforms meeting their intended objectives. However, all stakeholders were more assured on standards when specifically considering the QWE changes.

Candidates' confidence in the SQE reforms has declined since 2022, which was true of candidates who had not failed exams and those who had (who are more likely to have a negative perspective). The primary reason for lower confidence levels among candidates was a lack of clarity on exam expectations (sample questions reportedly not reflecting exam questions). And a perception that the exam was a memory test rather than testing a candidate's level of skill. Questions related to the technical components of the assessment will be addressed in the next phase of the SQE evaluation programme.

There were high levels of confidence in the SQE reforms among employers, and their confidence score had increased compared with 2022. Many believed the reforms aligned well with the objectives of maintaining consistent high standards and introducing diverse pathways to qualification. Despite this, employers still had concerns about their perception of wide variability in training provider quality. However, these perceptions, pass rates are not out of line with other high-stakes professional legal exams in England and Wales and overseas.

Training providers also showed high confidence in the SQE owing to their view that the competitiveness of the training provider market has improved overall training quality. However, many training providers believed that more insight into the exam would help them better prepare candidates, so they requested additional sample questions to improve their understanding.

Are the SQE reforms providing new and diverse ways to qualify to meet the pathways objectives?

Overall, at the third phase of the SQE evaluation programme, there is evidence that stakeholders believe that the SQE reforms are on track to providing new and diverse ways to qualifying as a solicitor.

Employers and training providers generally perceived the SQE reforms as addressing some key barriers within the legal profession. Both groups felt that the introduction of QWE was a positive step toward achieving new and diverse ways to qualifying as a solicitor. And they believed there

was now a wider selection of training options available at a broader range of price points than before the reforms.

Law firm employers, in particular, expressed rising confidence in the reforms' effectiveness since 2022, and training providers observed that the increased competitiveness of the market had improved the quality of training. However, training providers also noted the need for more insight into the examination process to better support candidates in their preparation.

In contrast, confidence among candidates across the SQE pathways metrics had declined since 2022, with fewer than one in five agreeing that the reforms would help remove unjustifiable barriers to qualification. The main concerns on barriers to the profession for candidates centred around the costs of training and assessment.

While direct comparisons between SQE and LPC costs are challenging due to limitations in data comparability, available evidence suggests that, at worst, candidates are paying equivalent amounts under the SQE. Most indications, however, point to the likelihood that overall expenses are lower than they would have been under the LPC. These differences highlight the complexities in evaluating the financial accessibility of the two qualification routes.

The introduction of QWE as part of the qualification reforms was seen as a positive step towards removing artificial and unjustifiable barriers by all stakeholders. The increased flexibility and accessibility to opportunities were viewed as key strengths. Despite this, some candidates highlighted barriers including difficulty in securing opportunities owing to high competition and difficulty in getting work experience confirmed by their employers. Employers valued the flexibility of QWE but also called for clearer guidance on confirming QWE.

When asked to assess the outlook of QWE on removing barriers to the profession in future, there were mixed opinions across stakeholders. Candidates were more sceptical than in 2022 about their effectiveness in achieving diversity and removing barriers, while employers remain cautiously optimistic. It is important to note that most candidates in the 2025 cohort lacked familiarity with the previous qualification process. And some of the reasoning behind the SQE's design, which limited their ability to respond to this question.

Industry stakeholders believed the introduction of QWE as part of the SQE reforms were a positive step towards achieving objectives. But they also highlighted the need for better assessment of barriers and engagement, particularly for students facing multiple challenges.

Overall assessment

The SQE reforms are providing greater assurance of consistent high standards at the point of admission as a solicitor for most stakeholders. While legal employer attitudes have improved to become positive since 2022, candidate confidence in the SQE examinations was negative overall and has fallen since 2022.

All stakeholder groups generally considered the SQE reforms to be on track to providing new and diverse ways to qualify as a solicitor. Stakeholders generally agreed that the reforms address barriers to qualification by offering more flexible and accessible pathways, particularly through the QWE changes.

While comparison between the SQE and LPC costs is imperfect, the evidence indicates that candidates paid around the same or less for their qualification than they would have under the LPC. However, candidates remained sceptical that costs were reasonable, citing training and exam costs as a barrier. Despite these hurdles, the reforms were largely viewed positively for introducing a broader range of training options at varying price points and maintaining lower overall expenses compared to the LPC.