

SQE Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Risk Assessment update on progress (July 2020 to February 2021)

April 2021

Update on progress made against the commitments in our final Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Risk Assessment (published July 2020). We have not provided an update on those areas which can only be progressed once the SQE assessments are live.

Open all [#]

Fairness

We will monitor performance by protected characteristics on the SQE on an ongoing basis

Once the SQE assessments go live, the assessment provider, Kaplan will publish data and analysis after each sitting. They will also create an annual report with more detailed analysis, including equality analyses. The SQE Independent Reviewer, Geoff Coombe, will also produce an annual report on the SQE assessments.

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Kaplan will recruit a diverse assessor team

Kaplan started recruiting exam assessors in December 2020, as well as permanent SQE-related roles. These included Welsh speaking subject heads, a head of equality and quality and an equality and quality supervisor.

We have encouraged people from diverse backgrounds, including disabled people and people from a range of ethnic groups and socio-economic backgrounds, to apply for these roles. Kaplan is also seeking assessors who are fluent in Welsh.

We promoted the vacancies on our LinkedIn and Twitter, in our SRA Update bulletin and to 14 legal sector representative groups. The roles were also included in the Law Society's equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) newsletter and listed on Black Solicitor Network's Job Board.

This resulted in more than 2,000 expressions of interest and, of these, almost a quarter answered the protected characteristics survey. Of those who answered, 31% were from a Black, Asian and minority ethnic background and a further 10% said they were disabled.

We will continue to work with Kaplan to recruit a diverse pool of assessors and will monitor progress as part of our ongoing quality assurance activity.

Diversity training will be mandatory for assessors, markers and question writers

Kaplan employees will play an important role in the delivery and oversight of the SQE assessments, and will complete EDI training on an ongoing basis. Targeted training will also be delivered to managers, team leaders, operational teams and academic teams, including examiners.

Diversity training for question writers is in progress and will be delivered through question writer events. This covers topics such as the language used in questions, avoiding cultural bias and being neutral on key issues.

Kaplan employees can also take part in an online discussion forum about diversity and inclusion.

We will conduct a full evaluation of the SQE and will begin work to develop the evaluation framework in autumn 2020

Following an open tender, Pye Tait Consulting have been appointed to carry out the first evaluation. We are now working on developing the evaluation framework, due to be published in summer 2021.

The second phase of the evaluation will include a focused evaluation of qualifying work experience (QWE). This includes the impact on the market and a study of stakeholder perceptions.

We will continue to engage with representative groups working in this area

We launched our SQE information strategy [<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/sqe-information-strategy/>] in December 2020, in response to the Bridge Group report 'SQE: monitoring and maximising diversity' [<https://www.sra.org.uk/globalassets/documents/sra/news/sqe-monitoring-and-maximising-diversity.pdf?version=4a00fc>].

This strategy explains our commitments to:

- tailor and target information to specific groups, whilst also making it available to everyone
- make sure that the right information is available to help people and organisations understand the SQE.

As evidenced throughout this update, we continue to engage extensively with representative groups to deliver these commitments, particularly in relation to ethnicity and disability.

For example, we worked closely with the Law Society's Lawyers with Disabilities Division, to launch the SQE Reasonable Adjustments Policy. Alongside this, we also published information for candidates and disability assessors. We continue to work with disability groups to discuss and develop additional resources as appropriate.

We meet regularly with representative groups for people from minority ethnic backgrounds, to update them on our plans and discuss their views. For example:

- we ran a session about the SQE for the UK Society of Chinese Lawyers in January 2021
- we discussed the EDI impacts with representatives from the Law Society's Ethnic Minority Lawyers Division and EDI Committee in February 2021

We continue to raise awareness of the SQE among younger students, particularly from backgrounds underrepresented in the solicitor profession. In spring 2021, with the Social Mobility Business Partnership [<https://smbp.org.uk/>], we talked to sixth form students about routes into law. We also work closely with Aspiring Solicitors [<https://www.aspiringsolicitors.co.uk/>], who aim to increase diversity in the legal profession.

We plan to research the underlying causes of disparities in performance to help us understand the causes and what we can do to help

We are commissioning independent research to investigate the causes of differential attainment in the legal professions. This will be informed by the results of the first cohort of SQE students. We will respond to the findings and continue to monitor the position as part of our SQE evaluation work.

We will report on the profile of SQE candidates and newly qualified solicitors

We will take a phased approach to publishing SQE candidate data. This is to make sure that what we provide best supports candidate choices. High level data will be available in early 2023, with fuller information available later that year.

We are carefully considering what forms of data to publish and plan to finalise our approach in summer 2021. This data could include:

- anonymised information about candidates' SQE results
- A level – or equivalent – results

- undergraduate institution and field of study
- training organisation for SQE1 and SQE2
- qualifying work experience placement(s)
- socio-economic information.

We will continue to engage with all stakeholders to discuss what data would be useful and how to present it. We are working with Kaplan to consider recommendations from the Social Mobility Commission and the Bridge Group, about the most effective ways to collect data on socio-economic background.

As part of our work to evaluate the SQE, we will carry out broader analyses of its impacts on the profile of the solicitor profession.

Access

Since July 2020, 19 more organisations have joined the SQE training providers [<https://www.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/sqe-training-options/training-provider-list/>] list (54 total).

On 30 July 2020, we confirmed that the total fee for taking the SQE will be £3,980, which breaks down as £1,558 for SQE1 and £2,422 for SQE2. This is in line with the £3,000-£4,500 figure set out in our original 2018 fee range estimates.

These fees do not include training costs, which will vary depending on a candidate's choices. The market is still emerging, but a number of training providers have already published their training costs. This includes some options that are substantially cheaper than the costs of training to qualify as a solicitor under the current LPC route.

We will make sure that SQE training providers have access to timely information to allow them to design appropriate courses and materials

On 15 December 2020, we ran a full day conference to share information with a range of interested parties about the SQE.

- 446 delegates registered to attend the event. Roughly half were from universities and training providers. The remaining delegates were mostly students or from law firms. 95% of attendees rated the event useful or very useful.
- We published videos, slides and resources [<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/news/events/on-demand-events/sqe-conference-2020/>] from the conference. To date, videos of the six conference sessions have attracted more than 4,400 views.

- The conference included a panel session about the EDI impacts of the SQE, with speakers from The Bridge Group and the Black Solicitors Network. 94% of respondents rated this session as useful or very useful.
- We also delivered a panel session with contributors from a range of training providers who are planning SQE preparatory training and a session on sample questions from the SQE2 assessment.

We have produced seven monthly SQE Update

[<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/news/sqe-update/>] , on key issues for stakeholders.

People are able to subscribe to alerts letting them know when a new bulletin is published.

We have also delivered nine webinars [<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/news/events/on-demand-events/>] :

- SQE final design - what the SQE will test (September 2020)
- SQE: qualified lawyers and overseas students (December 2020)
- SQE: transitional arrangements (December 2020)
- The SQE2 assessment (January 2021)
- Qualifying work experience - answers to common queries (January 2021)
- The SQE2 assessment (January 2021)
- QWE - what law firms need to know (February 2021)
- Apprenticeships for aspiring solicitors (February 2021)
- QWE - what aspiring solicitors need to know (March 2021)

We continue to manage our LinkedIn reference group for the SQE, which has more than 2,500 members, and Career in Law for aspiring solicitors, which has more 3,000 followers on Facebook

[<https://www.facebook.com/careerinlaw/>] and 1,000 on Instagram

[<https://www.instagram.com/careerinlaw/>] .

We will publish resources to help candidates who are looking for QWE

In addition to promoting our webinars about QWE on Career in Law, we have produced the following resources:

- QWE for candidates [<https://www.sra.org.uk/trainees/qualifying-work-experience/qualifying-work-experience-trainees/>] updated with essential information, an infographic and tips for candidates
- video about answers to common QWE queries, which has attracted more than 1,400 views

- training template to help candidates to record their QWE
- animated videos about QWE on Career in Law
- written post about paralegal work, also on Career in Law
- accessible visuals to explain QWE, in addition to visuals about taking the SQE1 and SQE2
- getting the best out of your QWE [<https://www.sra.org.uk/trainees/qualifying-work-experience/qualifying-work-experience-trainees/best-qualifying-work-experience/>] helps candidates to prepare for, record and confirm a QWE placement. It also explains that our powers to intervene are limited when an organisation is not regulated by us

We will add to our resources explaining the new routes to qualification and tailor these to the needs of different groups

In August 2020, we published information on possible SQE training options [<https://www.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/sqe-training-options/>] highlighting five options for qualifying under the SQE. We also launched a dedicated solicitor apprenticeships [<https://www.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/solicitor-apprenticeships/>] area, which includes Q&As, an infographic and a video resource.

We continue to offer tailored information for aspiring solicitors [<https://www.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/legal-practice-course-route/becoming-solicitor-legal-practice-course-transitional-requirements/>] who are already training and would look to qualify under the LPC route.

We will help training providers to understand the benefits of the new system and their role within it

We have made progress on this commitment through our extensive engagement with training providers, which is detailed throughout this update. For example, we ran a panel session about how providers and firms are preparing at our SQE conference, in partnership with four universities and two firms.

Engagement

Since July 2020, we have had a further 12,000 interactions with interested parties, through almost 47 meetings, events, webinars and surveys. This includes 11,600 views of SQE webinars, covering topics such as QWE, increasing access to the profession and key information about the assessment. In addition to this, we secured 117 pieces of coverage in the media, to reach the profession, aspiring solicitors and the public.

Online we have had 260,000 visits to our SQE-related web pages, as well as more than 68,000 engagements and 2m impressions on social media. And our Career in Law Facebook [<https://www.facebook.com/careerinlaw/>] and Instagram [<https://www.instagram.com/careerinlaw/>] have more than 4,000 followers. Our dedicated SQE Update bulletin now 2,000 subscribers to the email alerts telling people about the latest SQE news.

We will continue to engage with the profession on the potential benefits of the SQE

In December 2020, we held a QWE panel session on at our SQE Conference with the Law Society, training providers and firms. This has had more than 1,400 views and generated a number of questions which we published answers [<https://www.sra.org.uk/globalassets/sra/news/events/on-demand/sqe-2020/sqe-conference-questions-and-answers.pdf?version=4af7ff>] to.

We also ran a series of QWE webinars targeted at specific audiences, such as law firms and candidates.

We are running a 'SQE ready' communications campaign, primarily targeted at solicitors, legal businesses and aspiring students. This is to help them understand what the introduction of the new way of qualifying means and inform their choices.

In February 2021, we emailed all current training providers and law firms to help them to prepare for qualification changes. In particular, we updated them on QWE and the opportunities it affords them, as well as solicitors' confirmation obligations.

We will also hold two virtual events to help employers, training providers and aspiring solicitors get ready for the launch of the SQE.

We will continue to engage with all our stakeholders on what more information would be helpful

To develop our information strategy, we engaged with a wide range of stakeholders to strengthen our understanding of what information and resources would be useful to people from different groups. Our engagement included:

- user research, involving a survey of 123 respondents and 11 in depth interviews across the key user categories
- workshops with representative groups for people from minority ethnic backgrounds, including the Law Society's Ethnic Minority Lawyers Division
- workshops with disabled people's organisations and networks, including the Law Society's Lawyers with Disabilities Division

The Legal Services Board asked us to explore ways to protect candidates from the risk of harm because of their training provider becoming financially non-viable and exiting the market. We have engaged with the Office for Students and providers to look at options.

In addition to the resources already mentioned, we have published the following since October 2020:

- SQE Assessment Regulations [<https://www.sra.org.uk/students/sqe/sqe-assessment-regulations/>]
- SQE2 sample questions [<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/policy/solicitors-qualifying-examination/archive/sqe2-assessment-specification/sqe2-sample-questions/>]
- Information on the SQE1 and SQE2 assessments [<https://sqe.sra.org.uk/registering-and-booking>]
- Specific dates for the SQE1 [<https://sqe.sra.org.uk/registering-and-booking>]
- SQE logistics: SQE1 what happens on the day [<https://www.sra.org.uk/globalassets/documents/sra/sqe1-what-happens-on-the-day.pdf?version=4ae646>]
- SQE logistics: registration, booking and ID verification [<https://www.sra.org.uk/globalassets/documents/sra/sqe-registration-booking-logistics.pdf?version=4ae988>]
- Policies on appeals, complaints and conflict of interest and confidentiality [<https://sqe.sra.org.uk/policies>]

We will continue to work with other organisations that are developing resources to help SQE candidates

We are working with the Law Society to create resources about how the SQE can have a positive impact on how solicitors are recruited.

In partnership with the Clinical Legal Education Organisation, we are working to produce resources and a webinar for law clinics, with a focus on QWE.

We contributed information about the SQE to the Social Mobility Commission's socio-economic diversity and inclusion toolkit [https://socialmobilityworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/SMC-Financial-and-professional-services-sector-toolkit_WEB_Dec-2020_FINAL_web.pdf], for employers in the financial and professional services sectors.

We have engaged with people who have a large social media following among aspiring solicitors to help inform their SQE content.

We aim to produce resources for careers advisors in spring 2021.

We will continue to engage with the government on the issue of funding for the SQE

Our engagement with government is ongoing and it remains to be determined whether some providers will be able to access funding.

Next steps

We will continue to work to meet our commitments and place an emphasis on providing useful information for aspiring solicitors and other interested parties, including firms, through the implementation of our information strategy [<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/sqe-information-strategy/>]. The SQE website will launch in spring 2021, which will help us to provide information in an intuitive, accessible and user-friendly way.

We are planning to introduce the SQE on 1 September 2021, with the first sittings of the SQE1 assessment in November. At this stage, we do not expect the Covid-19 pandemic to affect this timeline but will continue to monitor the situation carefully.