

News release

Independent report highlights 'powerful potential' of SQE for diversity

14 July 2020

An independent report on the new Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) [<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/policy/solicitors-qualifying-examination/archive/research-reports/>] has concluded that the assessment design is fair and overall the SQE could help address diversity issues in the legal profession.

While recognising the SQE will not address all the diversity challenges in the legal profession, the Bridge Group - research experts on diversity and social equality - conclude that the SQE could help, while emphasising there is more we must do to achieve this.

In its report, it recognises that a major problem with the "current, fragmented system" is a lack of dependable, comparable data. Standardised data from the SQE could help the sector better understand diversity issues and inform potential solutions. This data could also help both employers and aspiring solicitors make choices.

It says that law is one of only a few professions where to qualify people must borrow large amounts of money at significant personal risk, with many shut out by the high cost of training. The report says the SQE could potentially increase the range and choice of legal training, while also driving down the costs through competitive pressures.

The report also challenges us to focus on gathering and analysing data - including on protected characteristics and socio-economic background - to enable us to review and evaluate the SQE's impact. We can then take informed decisions around the SQE's continued development. It recommends we should summarise our approach to data and evaluation so stakeholders know what will be published and when.

Success will also depend on buy-in from employers and training providers to take advantage of better information and new freedoms to promote greater diversity in recruitment. The Bridge Group goes on to say that we will need to provide information to help people navigate a new training market, and to reassure stakeholders that appropriate reasonable adjustments will be fully in place for candidates.

The report also highlights the fairness of the SQE design. It supports:

- the use of single-best-answer questions in SQE1 as an objective evaluation methodology as possible

- the decision for a uniform approach for the SQE2 assessment, with potentially greater diversity benefits than the alternative of giving candidates options.

Nicholas Miller, Chief Executive of the Bridge Group said: "There is no silver bullet to address diversity in the legal profession, but the SQE could help.

The current system is comparably fragmented and expensive. The SQE could reform the training market and give people more choice, while sharing standardised data has powerful potential to give the sector a better basis to understand - and address - diversity issues.

It is impossible to predict precisely the diversity implications of the SQE. Success will depend on how much legal business and training providers embrace the opportunities around these reforms.

The SRA also must make sure there is good information available for aspiring solicitors, while careful analysis and sharing of data will be crucial. It can then work with the sector to make informed decisions around the continued development of the SQE."

Paul Philip, SRA Chief Executive said: "Introducing a single rigorous assessment is fairer for everyone. Employers will have better information to recruit and the public can have greater confidence in consistent standards. Candidates will be judged on an equal basis, and by giving them more choice about how and where they train, we hope to enable more talented people to have a fair shot at qualifying.

We are pleased this report recognises the progress we have made, and we welcome both the robust review and the recommendations, which will help us to realise the benefits for everyone.

We know we don't have all the answers and that the SQE cannot on its own resolve all the diversity issues that the sector faces. This is a shared challenge for all the sector, but the insights we gain through the SQE should mean we are better placed to work together to tackle this problem."

The Bridge Group's report updates their 2017 assessment of the implications for diversity, and has involved input from the SRA, Law Society, Junior Lawyers Division, Kaplan and the SQE's independent reviewer.

We will reflect the Bridge Group's findings in an updated equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) impact assessment. The result of extensive engagement with a range of interest groups and other experts, it will publish the impact assessment ahead of our submission to the Legal Services Board (LSB) in the summer. If approved by the LSB, the SQE will be introduced on 1 September 2021.