

Technical Annex for the Solicitors Qualifying Examination: Phase Three Evaluation

November 2025

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Introduction

Overview of the methodology

This technical annex accompanies the main report. It summarises the methodologies used throughout the phase three evaluation of the SQE, as well as the scoping work conducted to refine the SQE evaluation framework and theory of change (ToC).

The evaluation utilised a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to collect diverse perspectives regarding the introduction of the SQE route to qualification, as detailed in the table below.

Table 1 Methodologies used

Component	Purpose
Review of existing materials (evaluation plan, ToC, 2022 SQE perceptions survey, and 2023 QWE survey)	Identified key evaluation questions; checked for gaps/oversights across the existing framework, logic model and indicators; scoped updates in light of learning since go-live.
Scoping qualitative interviews with SRA staff (n=6)	Tested/refined the logic model, indicators and data needs.
Workshop with SRA staff	Agreed revisions to the ToC and indicators.
Revised theory of change and indicators	Produced updated framework to guide phase three data collection and analysis.
Candidate survey (n=1,868) & qualitative interviews (n=30)	Quantified and explored candidate perceptions and experiences.
Employer survey (n=447) & focus groups (2 groups; n=12)	Quantified and explored employer perceptions.
Training provider survey (n=28) & qualitative interviews (n=9)	Captured provider perspectives.
Other stakeholder qualitative interviews (n=6)	Insights from organisations supporting diversity and professional development in the solicitors' profession.

Overview of the rest of this technical annex

This technical annex begins by reviewing the scoping phase of the research, detailing how the theory of change was reviewed and adjusted. Following this, the report provides a comprehensive overview of the methods used in quantitative and qualitative research across three key stakeholder groups: SQE candidates, employers, and training providers. It delves into sampling, design, fieldwork implementation, and data analysis for quantitative surveys, while also outlining recruitment strategies, topic guide design, fieldwork, and analytical approaches for qualitative interviews.

Scoping phase

Purpose of scoping exercise

The SRA appointed IFF Research to conduct an independent phase three evaluation of the SQE. The original theory of change (ToC) was developed by Pye Tait in 2021, before the first SQE assessments had gone live.

At the outset of the third phase of the evaluation, IFF Research reviewed the ToC and evaluation plan to ensure alignment with emerging data, stakeholder feedback, learnings since the SQE went live, and practical implementation insights. This adaptive approach allows for refining indicators, addressing unforeseen challenges, and enhancing the framework's robustness. Benefits include more accurate measurement of progress, relevance to evolving contexts, and strengthened capacity to achieve core objectives effectively.

The purpose of this scoping work was to revise the ToC by updating indicators, assumptions and data sources, so the framework remains fit for this phase and aligned to the reforms' objectives. This work ensures the evaluation remains dynamic and responsive, maximising its utility and impact.

Scoping method

The scoping exercise ensured that the phase three evaluation started with an evaluation framework grounded in three years of implementation experience. Specifically, the scoping stage took the following steps:

1. The IFF Research team conducted an assessment of the existing evaluation materials and evidence derived from prior research.
2. Based on their findings from the initial review, the IFF Research team developed a structured topic guide to facilitate interviews with key stakeholders from the SRA.
3. The SRA selected staff members for participation in the interviews, ensuring representation across relevant areas of expertise.
4. Qualitative interviews were executed to gather insights regarding the SQE ToC, logic model, and indicators, taking into account emerging data and feedback from stakeholders.
5. IFF Research also formulated distinct outcomes and indicators for QWE, addressing gaps left unexamined in earlier phases.
6. Proposed revisions to the evaluation framework were tested and refined through a dedicated workshop with SRA staff.
7. An agreed-upon and revised evaluation framework was produced, incorporating updated indicators, data sources, and timelines to guide phase three data collection and analysis.

The remainder of this section outlines how the phase three evaluation framework was refined through scoping exercises, stakeholder interviews, and collaborative workshops to ensure alignment with the evolving ToC and practical insights.

Initial review of evaluation materials

Pye Tait independently produced the evaluation plan and ToC for the SQE in 2021, before the first live SQE assessments had taken place¹. IFF Research therefore updated the ToC in light of learnings since the SQE had gone live. Prior to the phase three evaluation, two rounds of data collection were conducted by the SRA:

- A baseline survey 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.²
- An online survey in November 2023 on experiences of QWE, which asked most of the same questions relating to QWE as the initial survey conducted in 2022.³

IFF Research first conducted a thorough review of these materials. The aim was to identify key evaluation questions and check for any gaps or oversights in the ToC and logic model, as well as consider how the context and evidence had developed since the original evaluation materials were produced.

Topic guide design

IFF Research developed a semi-structured interview topic guide in collaboration with the SRA, ensuring each interview tested the evaluation plan and ToC, whilst also giving participants freedom to discuss additional issues. The guide contained six modules, each with indicative timings as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Scoping interviews topic guide structure

Module	Purpose	Time
A. Introduction & ethics	Explain research purpose, confidentiality, GDPR rights, audio-recording and obtain recorded consent.	5 mins
B. Role & responsibilities	Establish the participants' involvement in, and/or knowledge of, implementing or evaluating the SQE and QWE.	5 mins
C. Experiences to date	Capture successes, challenges, unforeseen results and stakeholder reactions from the first three years.	5 mins
D. Monitoring & outcomes	Systematically test each output, outcome and impact in the logic model (confidence, awareness, availability of routes). Common probes examined expected evidence, indicators, data gaps and responses to findings to date.	30 mins
E. Legal-service-provider coverage	Identify which non-traditional providers (e.g. in-house teams, clinics) should be included or	5 mins

¹ Pye Tait Consulting (2021), An evaluation framework for the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (<https://www.sra.org.uk/globalassets/documents/sra/research/an-evaluation-framework-for-the-solicitors-qualifying-examination-pye-tait-consulting.pdf>)

² Solicitors Regulation Authority. "SQE Year One." Last modified April 2025. <https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/sqe-year-one/>

³ Solicitors Regulation Authority. "Qualifying Work Experience Survey Findings." Last modified April 2025. <https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/qualifying-work-experience-survey-findings/>

	excluded from phase three evaluation fieldwork, and why.	
F. Wrap-up	Invite final comments and remind participants of confidentiality and follow-up routes.	5 mins

The topic guide included a common question set asked of all participants to maintain comparability across interviews. Additional prompts within certain questions were also included for specific participants to reflect each interviewee's individual expertise and job function (evaluation/policy, data operations, programme oversight, EDI).

Sampling

The SRA chose relevant colleagues internally for the interviews, ensuring their collective experience covered:

- Evaluation and policy
- SQE data strategy and operational delivery
- Programme-level oversight of the reforms
- Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

Fieldwork

Invitations were sent to selected SRA staff on 12 September 2024, and the interviews were completed during a two-week window from 18 September to 1 October 2024. A total of six in-depth interviews were conducted with selected SRA staff (four individual and two paired). All sessions were held remotely on Microsoft Teams and conducted by a member of the core research team at IFF Research involved in the project design and delivery.

Analysis

Each interview was audio recorded, and an auto-generated transcript was stored securely alongside the recording. The interviewer then populated an Excel-based analysis framework that listed every element of the original logic model (inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts) in rows and the six interviews in columns reviewing the audio and transcript as needed. Verbatim quotes or detailed paraphrases were inserted against the relevant cells, and new rows added where a theme emerged that was not already covered by the original framework.

Workshop

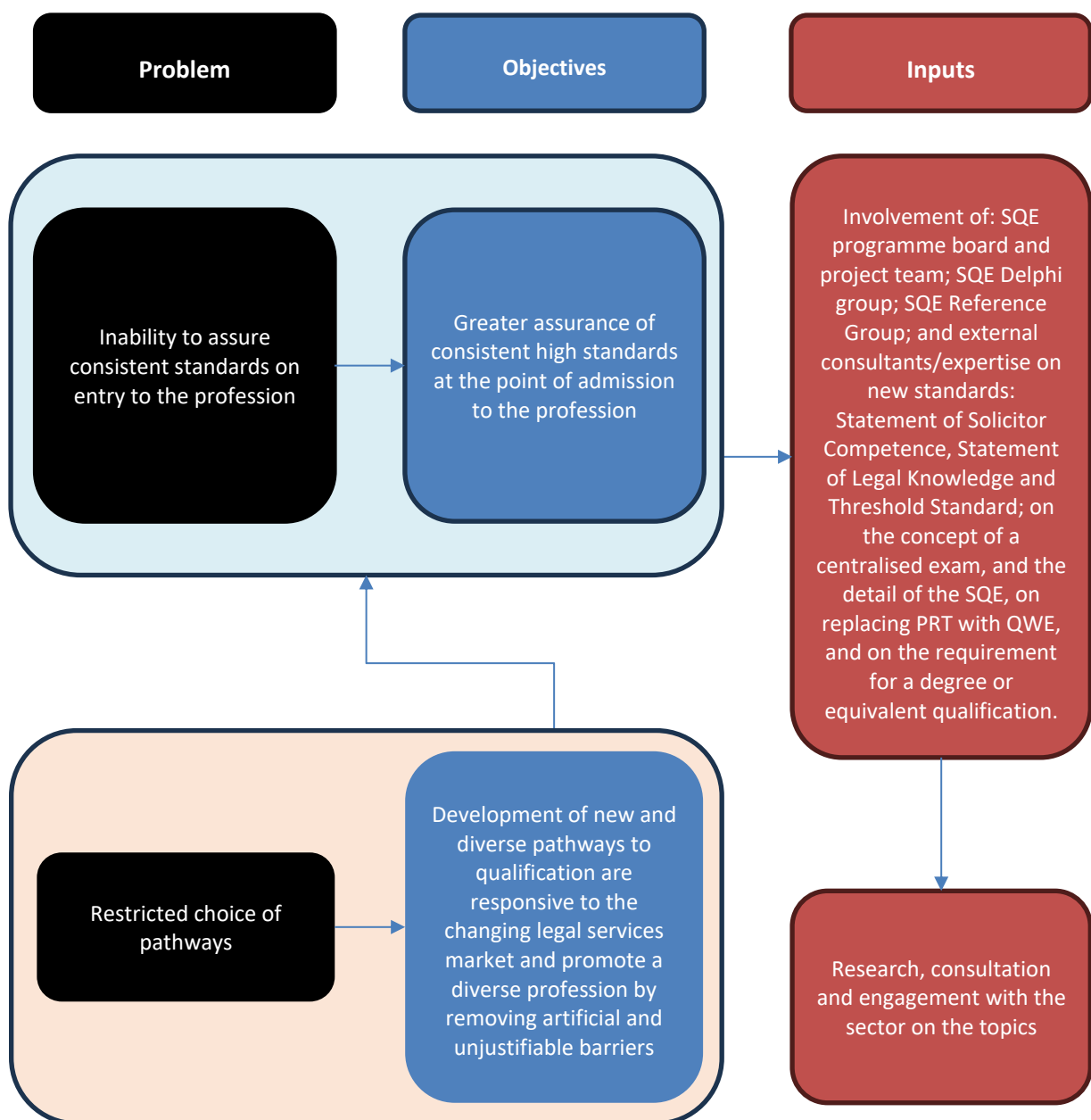
The findings from these interviews were then discussed in a collaborative 90-minute workshop with SRA staff, which subsequently informed the phase three evaluation objectives.

During the session the research team presented each theme, invited challenge and clarification, and recorded agreed actions. The workshop outputs were then mapped back onto the logic model, resulting in a refined set of phase three evaluation objectives and a shortlist of additional data needs for the next phase of the study.

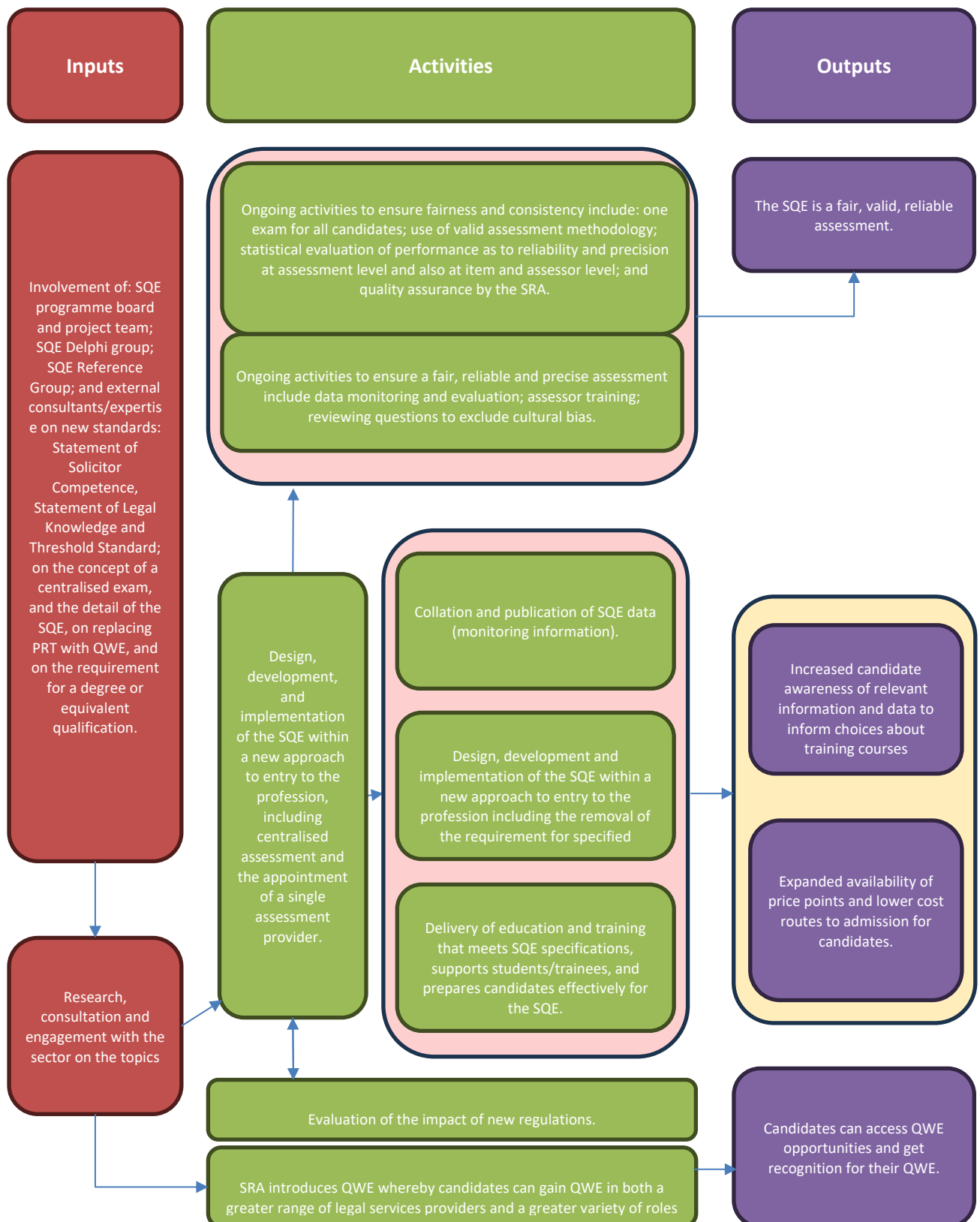
Theory of change

The updated ToC outlined below incorporates the revisions agreed upon during the scoping interviews, analysis, and workshop mentioned earlier. It illustrates how the SQE route to qualification are intended to address the identified problems through activities led by the SRA, ultimately resulting in measurable outputs, interim outcomes, and long-term impacts. It also shows the external conditions that could accelerate or hinder progress. Programme of quantitative surveys

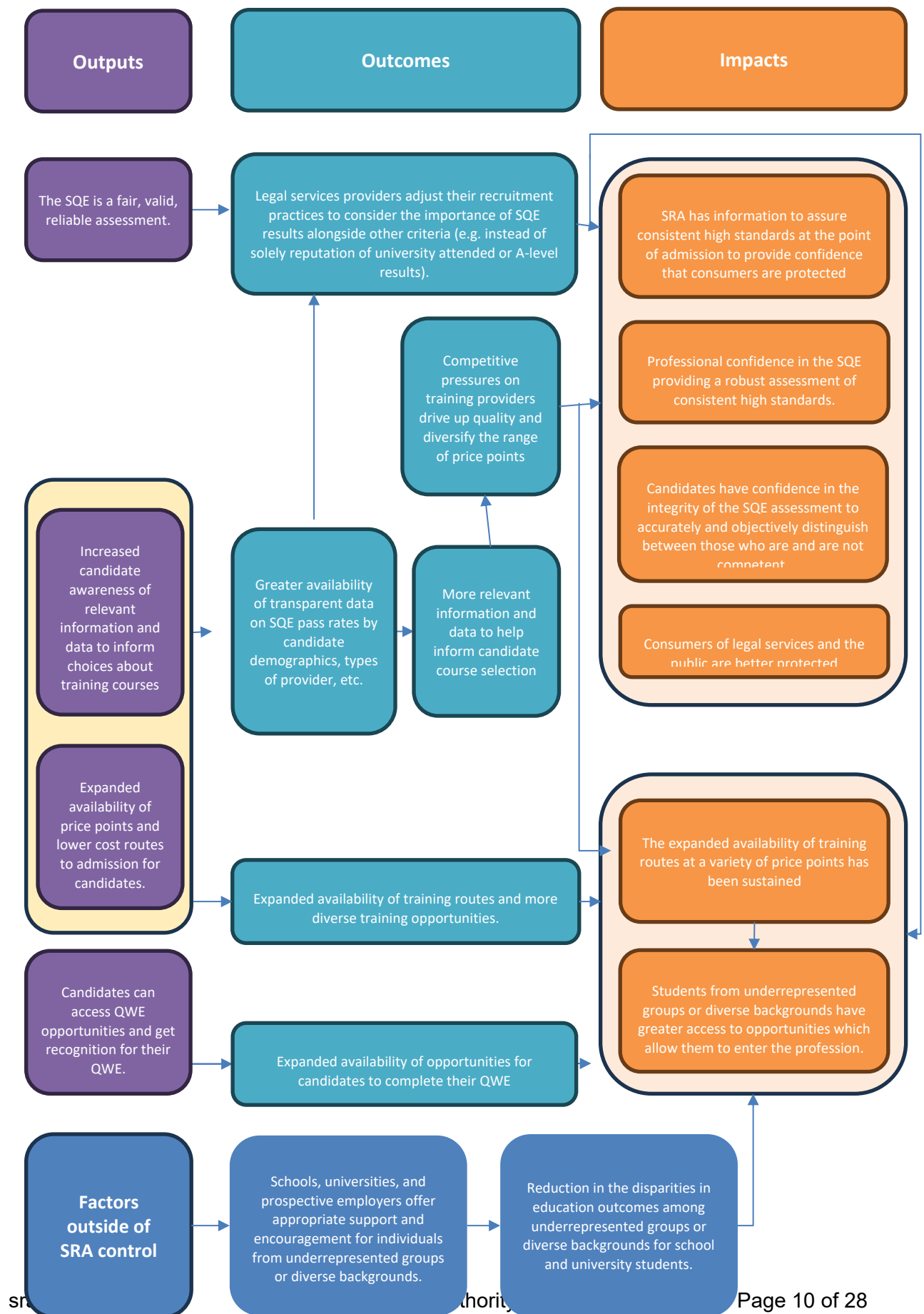
Theory of change part one: Problems, objectives, and inputs



Theory of change part two: Inputs, activities, and outputs



Theory of change part three: Outputs, outcomes, and impacts



Overview

This chapter covers the programme of quantitative surveys and runs through the methodology of the three different survey strands - the candidates, employers and training providers. The three surveys had some common aspects to their design, fieldwork, data reduction and analysis which will be discussed first. We will then summarise the specific methodological aspects of each of the three survey strands individually.

Survey design

All three surveys were designed to provide an insight into each audiences' experiences and perceptions of the SQE and QWE. The development of the surveys was informed by the research objectives and research questions. Some questions were taken from the previous 2022 SQE baseline survey and the 2023 QWE survey. Other questions were newly designed in order to gain fresh insight into each stakeholders' perception of the SQE and to gain additional information on whether the SQE is perceived to be on the path to achieving its longer term objectives.

Fieldwork

Before launch, the candidates' and employers' surveys were piloted. The training providers survey was not piloted due to the limited number of providers. Piloting involves administering the survey exactly as it would be for mainstage fieldwork. As well as allowing us to conduct a check on the comprehension of the questions and the flow of the questionnaire, the pilot also gave the opportunity to test the sampling approach and to monitor response patterns (particularly levels of don't know responses) and the overall survey length.

Data reduction

The IFF Research data services team undertook a thorough cleaning process before generating initial SPSS files, which were subsequently reviewed by members of the research team to ensure accuracy. Upon confirmation of the data's integrity, Excel table files incorporating significance testing were prepared for analytical use. Specific table divisions were established in collaboration with the SRA for the candidate and employer data.

Analysis

Once the final dataset and data tables for the survey were available, the research team reviewed the data against each research question to uncover the emerging narratives and to identify differences between key sub-groups. This was achieved through the application of descriptive (e.g. frequency distributions and averages) and statistical analysis techniques to establish significant differences at the 95% significance level. Data tables were produced to employ two types of testing:

- Significant difference between each set of cross break headings, such as comparing findings between different sector categories within the sector cross break header (t-testing)
- Comparing data within each subgroup break to the total minus the data in the individual column (z-testing).

Candidate and employer data was also compared to the previous survey data from 2022. This was only possible when questions remained consistent between survey waves. Significance testing was then undertaken to establish key significant differences between waves to assess how perceptions of the SQE have changed over time. The research team

then met for an analysis session to tie together all the findings from analysing the data before progressing to reporting.

Candidate survey

Sampling

The candidates' survey sample was sourced from the SRA's database of candidates from the 14,719 candidates who had sat at least one SQE exam between September 2023 and July 2024. Targets were set to ensure responses were representative of the overall demographic profile of candidates who sat an exam in this period. In total a target of 1,000 survey responses was set, based on an estimated 10% response rate, which was similar to what was achieved on the baseline survey. A full breakdown of the targets can be seen in **Error! Reference source not found. to Error! Reference source not found.** in the candidate fieldwork section below. Emails were sent to the full sample of candidates. The results were weighted to be representative of the total population of SQE candidates between September 2023 and July 2024 (14,719 records in total).

Survey design

The candidate survey was designed to provide an insight into candidates' experiences and perceptions of the SQE and QWE.

A summary of the topics is presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Summary of topics covered in the candidate survey

Topic	Description
Candidate Background	An exploration of how candidates selected their training providers and/or materials, including factors influencing their decision-making process and cost considerations related to the SQE.
SQE Evaluation	Candidates' opinions on the SQE across various measures such as fairness, high standards, accessibility, affordability, and diversity.
QWE Experience	Factors candidates considered when seeking QWE opportunities, their experience of finding opportunities, their satisfaction with these opportunities, the process of gaining competency experience, and experiences with QWE confirmation.
Demographics	Demographic questions asked for subgroup analysis purposes.

Fieldwork

The candidate survey was administered via online self-completion, with candidates accessing the survey via a personalised link issued by email invite. The survey was designed to take 15 minutes to complete. There was an initial plan to administer the survey

through mixed modes via online and telephone, however, response rates were very high by email, so the decision was made to administer the survey through online only.

The pilot involved 35 questionnaire responses in December 2024. Only minor alterations were made to the survey post-pilot and as a result the pilot responses were able to be included in the final results.

Emails were sent to all candidates in the sample in January with fieldwork conducted between 2nd January and 27th February 2025.

To maximise response rates, a number of strategies were employed, including:

- **Personalised introduction/invite:** To increase candidate engagement with the survey.
- **Reminder emails:** Two reminder emails were sent to all candidates to boost participation.
- **Dedicated mailbox:** A dedicated email address was set up for participants to get in touch with any queries regarding the survey.
- **Incentive:** All candidates who completed the survey could opt in to a prize draw with the potential to win £100 in Amazon vouchers to encourage participation.

The method employed for the survey proved effective as we were able to attain a higher response rate than envisioned. Out of the total sample of 14,719, a total of 1,868 completes were obtained, which represented nearly double the initial target. This equated to a 13% response rate overall.

Despite this overall success, the response rate amongst Asian or Asian British candidates was initially lower than other groups. To increase participation with Asian or Asian British candidates, it was decided two extra reminder emails would be sent to these groups. This boosted the proportion of responses within this group to a representative level.

The tables below present a breakdown of the achieved responses compared to the overall population of candidates in the year.

Table 4 Candidate targets and responses by ethnicity

Ethnicity	Sample	% of sample	Target	Completes	Response rate %
White	6,799	46%	460	955	14%
Asian / Asian British	4,157	28%	280	450	11%
Black / Black British	1,028	7%	70	160	16%
Mixed / multiple	732	5%	50	93	13%

ethnic groups					
Other ethnic group	914	6%	60	117	13%
Prefer not to say	1,089	7%	70	91	8%

Table 5 Candidate targets and responses by gender

Gender	Sample	% of sample	Target	Completes	Response rate %
Male	5,044	35%	350	536	11%
Female	9,328	65%	650	1,259	13%
Other	6	-	-	1	-
Prefer Not to Say	341	-	-	70	21%

Table 6 Candidate targets and responses by age

Age	Sample	%	Target	Completes	Response rate %
16 - 24	4,983	34%	340	602	12%
25 - 34	7,011	48%	480	875	12%
35 - 44	1,871	13%	130	268	14%
45 +	597	5%	50	100	17%
Prefer Not to Say	257	-	-	23	9%

Table 7 Candidate targets and responses by school attended

School type	Sample	%	Target	Completes	Response rate %
Attended school outside the UK	5,140	35%	350	634	12%
All other codes	9,579	65%	650	1,234	13%

Table 8 Candidate targets and responses by main income earner

Main income earner	Sample	%	Target	Completes	Response rate %
Professional background	7,454	51%	510	949	13%
All other codes	7,265	49%	490	831	11%*

*don't know answer code not included

Data reduction

Once the data had been cleaned, specific table divisions were established in collaboration with the SRA, including data breaks categorising candidates by whether they had previously failed an SQE examination, alongside additional demographic, SQE, and QWE background classifications.

Candidate data was weighted using a rim weight. Rim weighting adjusts survey data to align with known population profiles by iteratively balancing demographic variables until the sample reflects the target population accurately. This was to remove any potential bias in the data and ensure that survey data reflects the wider population. The weighting profiles were light overall as the achieved sample was quite close to the overall population profile. The weighting profiles can be seen below in Table 9 to Table 14.

Table 9 Weighting profile by ethnicity

Ethnicity group	n
White	0.90
Asian	1.16

Black	0.82
Mixed	1.00
Other	0.99
Prefer not to say	1.52

Table 10 Weighting profile by gender

Gender	n
Female	0.91
Male	1.18
Other / prefer not to say	1.60

Table 11 Weighting profile by age

Age	n
16-24	1.06
25-34	1.01
35-44	0.88
45+	0.77
Prefer not to say	1.44

Table 12 Weighting profile by SQE stage

SQE stage	n
SQE1	0.99
SQE2	0.90

No assessment	2.10
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Table 13 Weighting profile by disability

Disability	n
Yes	0.75
No assessment	1.01
Prefer not to say	1.19

Table 14 Weighting profile by school status

School status	n
Outside UK	1.05
UK	0.92
Unknown / prefer not to say / other	1.09

Employer survey

Sampling

The sample for the Employer Survey was mostly obtained from the SRA using its database of registered solicitors and law firms. This included solicitors in law firms, but also non-law firm legal employers, which included solicitors registered to work for public sector organisations and non-law firm private sector organisations, all of whom could host SQE candidates for QWE. Additionally, law clinics were added to the sample as a potential QWE host under the SQE reforms. Law clinics were sourced using the LawWorks register of legal advice clinics.⁴

The sample framework was designed to ensure analytical robustness across a diverse range of legal employer types. While the distribution of samples broadly reflected sectoral proportions, deliberate overrepresentation of smaller subgroups, such as large and very large practices, was implemented to enable meaningful subgroup analysis. These groups,

⁴ LawWorks. "Find a Legal Advice Clinic Near You." LawWorks, accessed May 1, 2025. <https://www.lawworks.org.uk/legal-advice-individuals/find-legal-advice-clinic-near-you>

though numerically limited in the wider population, were assigned minimum thresholds (e.g. 50 interviews) to ensure sufficient statistical power for standalone reporting.

Survey design

The employer survey was designed to provide an insight into employer experiences of the SQE and running QWE.

A summary of the topics is presented in Table 15.

Table 15 Summary of topics covered in the employer survey

Category	Details
Old qualification route	Whether the employer has provided or still provides training contracts as part of the old route to qualifying as a solicitor.
SQE Evaluation	Employers' opinions on the SQE across different measures including fairness, ensuring high standards, accessibility, affordability, and diversity.
Trust in SQE	Whether employers' trust in the SQE has increased or decreased.
Information Sources on SQE	What information sources employers have used on the SQE and QWE and how useful they have found them.
QWE Experience	Factors for why employers chose to offer QWE opportunities.
Opinions on QWE	Employers' opinions on QWE covering aspects such as the clarity of its requirements, whether it develops necessary competencies, its potential to remove artificial barriers to the solicitor profession, and its role in promoting diversity.
Costs Covered by Employers	What costs employers cover or do not cover for candidates.
Benefits and Challenges	Employers' opinions on and experiences of the benefits and challenges of the QWE reforms.

Fieldwork

The employer survey was administered as a Computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) interview. This method was adopted as it was a more appropriate approach to ensure engagement with employers and due to the scarcity of sample for some of the audiences. Interviews tended to last around 20 minutes.

The pilot involved 20 interviews in November 2024. Only minor alterations were made to the survey post-pilot and as a result the pilot interviews were able to be included in the final results.

Emails were sent to all employers in the sample in January informing them about the survey with fieldwork conducted between 2nd January and 27th February 2025. The initial target of 450 completes was reached, although data validation revealed that three completes needed to be discounted as they had instead been answered by training providers that subsequently were invited to take part in the training provider survey. There were 1,889 calls in total made to employers and the table below shows response rates amongst law firms and non-law firm legal employers.

Table 16 Completed employer surveys by organisation size and type

Size and Organisation Type	Completes	Response rate %	Weight
Sole Practitioners	55	24%	1.17
Small Law firms (<= 4 partners and <£400,000 turnover)	126	19%	0.89
Medium Law firms (5 or more partners and a turnover of over £400,000 but not in the top 1000)	130	28%	1.11
Large and Very Large Law firms (ranked turnover 1-1000)	52	20%	0.82
Law firm legal employers	363	22%	-
Non-law firm legal employers	82	10%	1.00
Total	447	18%	-

Data reduction

It was decided that to make the employer data representative, employer data needed to be weighted. The weighting profile for law firm legal employers is shown in **Error! Reference source not found.**

Specific breaks of the data on employer characteristics were agreed with the SRA. These included the size of the organisation, whether they have hosted QWE and/or provided training contracts through the previous route, whether they have made changes to their procedures, and region.

Analysis

Once the final data tables were available, employer data was analysed and compared to the previous employer evaluation data from 2022. This was only possible when questions remained consistent between survey waves. Significance testing was then undertaken to establish key significant differences between waves to assess how employer perceptions of the SQE have changed over time.

Training provider survey

Sampling

The sample used for the training providers interviews came directly from the SRA's database of SQE training providers. The SRA's database of providers can be found on their website⁵.

Survey design

The training providers survey was designed to provide an insight into training provider experiences of the SQE and running QWE.

The summary of the topics covered in the training providers survey is below:

Table 17 Summary of topics covered in the candidate survey

Topic	Description
Course format	What courses and the format of courses that training providers are offering currently and whether they have run LPC courses in the past. Also exploring whether the introduction of the SQE has influenced the number and type of courses providers are running.
Course advertisement	How training providers attract candidates to take their courses and how easy or difficult they find this.
Information sources	What sources of information training providers engage with when planning their courses and materials.
Perceptions on the SQE	Training provider perceptions of whether the SQE will ensure high standards, is fair, that expectations are clear, that fees are fair, that the SQE is accessible, whether there is a wide range of SQE training options and that the SQE will help to remove artificial barriers to the solicitor profession.

Fieldwork

Due to the limited number of SQE training providers, attempts were made to contact all 112 of the providers on the SRA's database to take part in the survey. Up to five email invitations were sent to all training providers on the SRA's database of providers sent by both IFF Research and by the SRA. In addition to the online option, training providers were called and could take part via a CATI survey. The survey covered the same attitudinal statements as the candidate and employer surveys, as well as questions exploring the way providers are marketing their courses to candidates and the reasons behind their different course options.

⁵ Solicitors Regulation Authority, "SQE Training Providers List," accessed April 23, 2025, <https://www.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/sqe-training-options/training-provider-list/>

A total of 32 completed surveys were achieved out of the total number of training providers contacted. There were 366 interactions made with the open link sent to training providers, however some of these could have been with antivirus software rather than interest being shown in the survey.

Data reduction

The survey received a total of 32 completed responses. This included 24 online completes and eight completes over the phone. However, eight responses originated from instances where multiple individuals from the same organisation participated. To minimise over-representation of any single organisation's viewpoint, the most junior job title was removed in each instance removing four interviews, leaving a final dataset of 28 unique organisational perspectives. Due to the small number of completes, Excel tables with significance testing were not viable so instead an SPSS with the raw data of completes was used for analysis.

Analysis

Analysis of the training providers' data was different to that of the candidates and employers. This was due to the low base size of 28 completed surveys. The low base size 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.

Qualitative data collection and analysis

Overview

This chapter outlines the methods for the qualitative research, including sampling and recruitment, topic guide design and fieldwork for each strand (candidates, employers, training providers and industry stakeholders). The analysis method for each strand took a similar approach, so this is covered in one section towards the end of the chapter, before closing with the limitations of the qualitative research.

Interviews were selected for candidates, as they are more appropriate than focus groups given the various pathways to qualification and the unique nature of personal experiences. Interviews were also conducted with training providers and stakeholders to enable participants to be open and honest about their approach to providing their courses and also expand on their views towards the reforms. Focus groups were chosen for employers to allow participants to bounce ideas off one another and engage in a more learning-based environment.

Candidates

Samples and quota setting

The starting sample for candidates was based on survey participants who gave permission to be re-contacted for the follow-up interviews. This approach allowed us to draw on their responses to the survey to prompt discussion in the interviews.

Quotas were established to ensure representation across different pathways into the profession, considering variations such as learning method, SQE status, and location. Table 18 to Table 20 present the targets that were used when recruiting for the interviews with candidates.

Table 18 The number of completed interviews against target sample for learning method of candidates

	Target	Completed
Degree incorporating SQE training	10	11
Standalone SQE training courses AND law education background	10	11
Standalone SQE training courses AND no law education background	3	4
Apprenticeship	4	4
Self-taught	3	3

Total	30	33 *
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Table 19 The number of completed interviews against target sample for the pass or failed status of candidates

	Target	Completed
Sat and failed SQE1 or 2 and not yet resat	5	12
Failed (at least once), before passing	10	9
Passed both SQE 1 and 2	15	11
Total	30	32 *

Table 20 The number of completed interviews against target sample for the location of candidates

	Target	Completed
Lives in UK		26
Outside the UK	>5	4
Total	NA	30

Topic guide design

A topic guide with a modular design was used to provide a greater depth of insight into experiences of the SQE and QWE discussed in the quantitative survey. The topic guide consisted of modules for all participants, with suggested follow-up prompts to allow interviewers to tailor interviews to ensure participants were probed sufficiently and maximise respondent engagement levels. The topic guide modules were informed by the research objectives and research questions, and the areas that required further exploration based on emerging survey findings. The summary of the topics covered in the interviews are shown in Table 21.

* Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive, and one respondent could be part of multiple

Table 21 Candidate topic guide content summary

Topic	Description
Funding SQE Training	Whether individuals found it easy or difficult to fund their training and reasons behind it.
SQE Fees	Opinions on whether the fees for sitting the SQE are reasonable or not, and the reasoning.
SQE experience	Key topics include experiences of studying towards the SQE and whether their training adequately prepared them for the assessments.
SQE and QWE Market Navigation	Experiences in choosing SQE training providers and navigating the QWE market.
Satisfaction with QWE	Whether individuals were satisfied with the QWE they've done and why.
QWE experience	Key topics include satisfaction with QWE, experience getting QWE confirmed, advice for finding QWE, and how it prepares individuals for solicitor work.
Confidence Levels Post-QWE	Confidence levels of individuals after gaining QWE in qualifying as a solicitor and practising law.

Fieldwork

To encourage participation, candidates were incentivised with a £40 payment, via a PayPal transfer or Amazon voucher.

A total of 30 qualitative interviews were carried out with candidates.

The interviews were conducted between 13th February and 14th March 2025. They were held via Microsoft Teams and lasted up to 60 minutes.

Employers

Sampling and quotas

The focus groups with employers were convened to gain deeper insights into their perspectives regarding the SQE reforms. The focus groups were conducted with participants who completed the survey and agreed to take part in follow-up discussions to elaborate on their responses to the survey.

Experience with hosting QWE was identified as a significant factor shaping perceptions in the quantitative analysis, and specific targets were established for employers based on their familiarity with QWE for the focus groups. A mix of experience was desirable to understand

views towards the changes brought about by the SQE based on exposure to the reforms. Table 22 below shows the targets that were put in place for this.

Table 22 The experience levels of employers who participated in the focus groups by target

	Target	Completed
Experience hosting QWE	12	10
No experience hosting QWE	4	2
Total	16	12

Topic guide design

The focus group topic guide was developed to foster open discussions around their views towards the SQE reforms. Most questions included suggested follow-ups to further probe on certain views. The summary of the topics covered in the focus groups are shown in Table 23.

Table 23 Candidate topic guide content summary

Topic	Description
Barriers to hosting QWE	Challenges faced by organisations in providing QWE opportunities under the new SQE framework.
Support during the SQE reforms	The type and quality of assistance provided to stakeholders during the implementation of SQE reforms.
Views towards whether they have received adequate support	Perceptions of stakeholders regarding whether the support offered was sufficient and effective.
Enablers and barriers of the SQE reforms for candidates	Factors that facilitate or hinder candidates' ability to navigate the SQE reforms successfully.
Views towards whether the new system has opened up pathways	Assessments of whether the SQE reforms have provided more opportunities for a diverse group of individuals to pursue legal careers.
Barriers for candidates to qualifying under the SQE reforms	Obstacles encountered by candidates attempting to meet the qualification

	requirements introduced by the SQE reforms.
Recruitment practices	Current methods and practices used by organisations in hiring candidates within the legal sector.

Fieldwork

Two focus groups were conducted in March 2025, one on 3rd March and the other on the 4th March. Both focus groups were held via Microsoft Teams and lasted 90 minutes. The first group included seven participants and only included employers with experience of hosting SQE candidates for QWE. The second group had five participants and was sampled to include a mix of employers that were currently hosting candidates and employers that were interested in hosting but were yet to do so. This group included three participants that had experience hosting QWE, and two participants that had no experience hosting QWE.

Training providers

Sampling and recruitment

The objective of the interviews conducted with training providers was to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences in offering SQE training, as a follow-up to the quantitative survey responses. No specific targets were established for these interviews, and participants were recruited on a first-come, first-served basis, with the aim of conducting ten interviews in total.

Topic guide design

A topic guide with a modular design was used for the interviews with training providers. Participants were asked all modules, and follow-up questions were provided to allow interviewers to probe into particular discussions and maximise respondent engagement levels. A summary of the topics is presented in Table 24.

Table 24 Summary of the training provider topic guide content

Topic	Description
Ease of attracting candidates	Whether providers found it easy or difficult to attract potential candidates to their SQE preparatory courses.
Information provided to candidates	Details on the information shared with potential candidates to help them choose a training course.
Candidate experience	Insights into the experiences of candidates participating in the SQE preparatory courses and assessments.
Trust and attitudes towards reforms	Opinions on the effectiveness and trustworthiness of the reforms brought by the SQE.

Clarity of expectations	Views on whether the expectations of the SQE are clear or not and the reasons why.
Fairness of assessment	Opinions on whether the SQE is a fair assessment or not, along with explanations.
Testing knowledge and skills	Views on whether the SQE sufficiently tests the knowledge and skills needed to practise competently as a solicitor on day one of practice, including reasons.

Fieldwork

A total of nine interviews with training providers were conducted between 12th March and 1st April 2025 via Microsoft Teams and lasted up to an hour each.

Industry stakeholders

Sampling and recruitment

Interviews were held with key stakeholders to gather perceptions from wider groups on the SQE and QWE reforms. The 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. There were no targets for this audience, and interviews were recruited on a first-come-first-served basis.

Topic guide design

The topic guide used a modular design where stakeholders were asked all modules and consisted of follow-up prompts to facilitate deeper discussions and allow interviews to maximise engagement. The topic guide consisted of modules to understand the representative bodies' perspectives on the SQE reforms.

A summary of the topics is presented in Table 25

Table 25 Summary of the industry stakeholder topic guide content

Topic	Description
Standards	Explores whether the SQE has ensured consistent high standards at the point of qualification and whether it provides greater reassurance of consistency compared to the LPC route.
Availability of Routes	Examines whether the SQE has helped to remove barriers and whether it has changed the availability of cost-effective and flexible routes to qualification.
Changes to QWE	Investigates how the changes have been received in the legal sector, their impact on equality, diversity, and inclusion, and

	potential ways to further enhance availability of suitable QWE for candidates.
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Fieldwork

A total of six interviews were conducted with these stakeholders between 7th and 26th March 2025 via Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately an hour each.

Analysis of qualitative interviews

Transcripts and notes from in-depth interviews were used to produce detailed write-ups in bespoke Excel-based analysis frameworks for each audience. These frameworks were structured under headings aligned with the evaluation's research objectives and ToC, allowing interviews to be compared and judgements made about the commonality of perceptions, experiences and behaviours. The frameworks also included demographics (ethnicity, gender, etc.) or firmographics (e.g. firm size) to enable easy analysis of subgroup differences. To ensure consistency and accuracy in analysis, the interviewing team received a thorough briefing on the structure and requirements of each framework. Entries into the framework involved synthesising feedback from different parts of the interview, documenting key insights, highlighting impactful verbatim, and identifying areas to explore further in other interviews. Drop down menus were incorporated to facilitate categorisation and thematic coding for the interviews.

At the conclusion of each phase of qualitative interviewing, an in-depth analysis session was convened. During these sessions, the teams collectively discussed themes emerging from the interviews and triangulated them against the findings from other strands of data collection and analysis (e.g. surveys) in relation to the objectives of the evaluation.

It should be noted that because qualitative samples are relatively small and purposively designed, the findings from qualitative interviews cannot be considered representative of the views of all stakeholders. However, qualitative interviews are a valuable component of this evaluation as they provide in-depth and nuanced insight into perceptions, feelings, and behaviours that may be overlooked in numerical data.

Overall descriptive statistics and significant differences from the quantitative data and summaries of the qualitative data were used to populate an overall evaluation framework to ensure each intended objective of the research was covered and a synthesised story of the evidence could be achieved, triangulating all the sources of information.