

News release

Final SQE design to ensure consistent high standards

08 June 2020

Our Board has approved the final design of the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) [<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/policy/solicitors-qualifying-examination/sqe-final-design/>].

Set to be introduced in 2021, the SQE will replace the current system where different tests are set and marked by more than 100 different organisations. The new centralised assessment aims to increase consumer protection by providing greater assurance that all qualifying solicitors meet consistent, high standards at the point of admission. Almost four out of five members of the public said they would have more confidence in solicitors if they passed the same final examination.

The SQE also aims to tackle the problem that the current training route is overly expensive and inflexible. Many people are put off by the high up-front costs - up to £17,000 - of the Legal Practice Course, with no guarantee of a training contract. The SQE should encourage new ways of training, including 'earn-as-you-learn' routes such as apprenticeships. It will also enable a more flexible approach to qualifying work experience. This could help promote a more diverse profession.

Our Board agreed that the final design meets its key criteria of being valid, reliable, manageable and cost effective. Those who qualify under the SQE will need to:

- have a degree in any subject (or equivalent qualification or experience)
- meet our character and suitability requirements
- gain two years' qualifying work experience
- pass two stages of SQE assessment: SQE1 will test candidates' functioning legal knowledge of the law of England and Wales; SQE2 will test the practical legal skills of legal research, legal writing, legal drafting, case and matter analysis, advocacy, client interviewing and attendance note/legal analysis, through 15 - 18 tasks (or 'stations'). It requires both competent client handling and communication skills and the ability to apply legal knowledge accurately. Ethics and professional conduct will be examined across SQE1 and SQE2

The decision on the final design follows a nine-year process of consultation on solicitors' training. In the last 18 months we have worked with our

assessment provider Kaplan to refine the detail of the assessments through piloting, engagement, expert input and independent review. This has involved 13,000 interactions with interested parties, including around 150 meetings and events with a wide range of stakeholders ¹ [1] .

As a result, we have made improvements to the assessment design including:

- changing SQE1 to two 180 question assessments rather than three with 120 questions each. This will improve the reliability and accuracy of the exam
- focusing skills testing in SQE2, with SQE1 focused on functioning legal knowledge. Stakeholders views were split on this issue. Reasons for the SRA's decision include removing duplication with practical legal skills tested extensively in SQE2, avoiding an unjustified increase in assessment costs, and it being the best way to create a valid, reliable, cost effective and manageable assessment
- candidates all taking the same assessment for SQE2. Expert review and the pilot results showed this is the best way to create a fair and consistent assessment with a universal standard at admission rather than options for candidates on which practice areas they have their skills tested in
- making sure the SQE will be available in both Welsh and English. Responding to stakeholder feedback, this will be done through a phased introduction, leading to full parity between English and Welsh within four years.

Changes to the design were informed by expert input, independent review and two pilot exercises, involving more than 480 candidates, as well as analysis of data from the Qualified Lawyers Transfer Scheme. This QLTS data involves a total of over 16,000 candidate attempts spread across multiple choice and legal skills assessments.

The SQE1 pilot results, published last year

[<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/news/press/2019-press-release-archive/sqe-pilot-results/>] , and

SQE2 pilot results have shown that the SQE is on course to meet the rigorous, international standards expected of professional licencing assessments - protecting consumers while being fair to candidates.

Feedback from candidates who responded to a survey was positive. For instance, 87% of candidates responded either positively (80% strongly agreed/ agreed) or neutrally (7%) that the legal skills questions were clear, and 84% responded positively (67% strongly agreed / agreed) or neutrally (17%) that the legal skills questions reflected problems that might be encountered by a day one solicitor.

The SQE's Independent Reviewer confirmed that the planning, operation, and analyses of the pilot was generally of a high or very high quality.

Paul Philip, SRA Chief Executive, said: "We started the journey of looking at how solicitors train nine years ago. Since then we have had invaluable input from our expert partners and thousands of people and organisations, ranging from the public to employers and students, solicitors to training providers.

"Extensive input, expert and independent review and careful testing means we are confident that we have developed a rigorous, fair, world class assessment for all aspiring solicitors, regardless of background or route taken. The SQE will provide greater assurance for the public and employers that qualifying solicitors have met the consistent, high standards they would expect."

Peter Houillon, CEO of Kaplan Professional UK and Ireland said: "The design of the SQE is based on 18 months of consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, two pilots involving over 480 candidates, analysis of QLTS data involving a total of over 16,000 candidate attempts across 19 multiple choice tests and 18 legal skills assessments, as well as world leading psychometric expertise in professional assessment leading to licensure including licensure in law. As a result, we are confident that the SQE will be reliable, accurate, valid, cost effective and manageable, reaching the high-quality standards that consumers, candidates and the profession rightly expect."

The approach to the SQE1 and SQE2 pilot has been validated by an independent reviewer, appointed after an open recruitment process.

Geoff Coombes, the SQE Independent Reviewer said: "I observed the two SQE pilots. The planning, operation and analyses of the pilots were generally of high quality and helpfully contributed to the evidence needed to finalise the SQE design. My conclusion is that the final design is best placed to provide a valid, fair and reliable assessment. As with any new qualification it will be important to review and continuously improve this new design once operating."

We will now carry out a final period of engagement, including the opportunity for feedback on an updated SQE2 assessment specification. We will also publish the final costs for taking SQE1 and 2. The costs for taking both will be within the initial estimates of between £3,000 and £4,500.

We will then make a final submission to the Legal Services Board (LSB) in the summer. If approved by the LSB, the SQE will be introduced on 1 September 2021. The first assessment - SQE1 - would run in autumn 2021, with the first SQE2 assessment in spring 2022.

Notes

1. Please note: we have updated this release since first published. Originally we said that this engagement had involved almost 300 meetings - the correct figure is 150 in the last 18 months. We have, however had almost 300 meetings since 2017.