

News release

One year review of SQE shows good progress

16 March 2023

A suite of reports [<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/policy/solicitors-qualifying-examination/sqe-reports/>] reviewing the first year of our Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) has shown that overall implementation of the new assessment has gone well. The reports include an annual review [<https://sqe.sra.org.uk/exam-arrangements/sqe-reports/sqe1-january-2023>] from the SQE's assessment provider, Kaplan, and by the SQE's Independent Reviewer [<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/sqe-independent-21-22/>] .

The SQE was introduced in September 2021. The reports cover the first year of assessments, in which there were three sittings - two for SQE1, which tests candidates' legal knowledge, and one for SQE2, testing both the application of legal knowledge and skills.

More than 3,000 candidates took assessments across 42 countries. The SQE Independent Reviewer concluded that candidates, stakeholders, and the public should have confidence that the assessments were fair and reliable. He also recognised that generally the SQE has been delivered effectively, and that where issues had emerged, lessons were being learned and action taken.

Kaplan's report highlights some emerging trends on performance, although it cautions against drawing firm conclusions until there is more candidate data. Key themes so far are that, generally, candidates:

- with higher degree classifications perform significantly better in the assessments - for instance, 71% of candidates with a first passed SQE1 compared to 32% with a 2.2.
- who were apprentices performed well - with pass rates 26% higher than the overall rate [<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/news/press/2023-press-releases/apprenticeships-week-2023/>] . Candidates who had done some qualifying work experience also performed better, with 10% more passing compared to those who had not.
- performed better in SQE2, with a pass rate of 77% compared to 53% for SQE1 - this is unsurprising given most candidates need to have passed SQE1 before they can take SQE2.
- who need to resit SQE1 are more likely to fail again when compared to first time sitters

- who did not need to take SQE1 - which is generally lawyers qualified in another jurisdiction who had previously passed the Qualified Lawyers Transfer Scheme multiple choice test or candidates who have previously passed the Legal Practice Course (LPC) - did not perform as well on SQE2. 67% of this group passed compared to 89% of those who had passed SQE1.

Although the evidence shows there is no systemic bias in the SQE itself, the data show that there are differences in performance by ethnicity. White and mixed/multiple ethnicity candidates generally performed better than Asian/Asian British and Black/Black British candidates. Although this was an expected outcome, as it is a long-standing and widespread feature in examinations in the legal and other sectors, it is still troubling. We have commissioned research from University of Exeter to help us better understand the complex factors that might contribute to differing performance in this area.

Paul Philip, SRA Chief Executive, said: 'It's been a positive start. One of the main reasons we introduced the SQE was to bolster confidence that qualifying solicitors were meeting the same, high standard. It's good to see all the analyses show it is a robust, fair, valid assessment. Generally, the candidate experience has been good, but we are committed to improving it further.

'It's too early to draw conclusions on the long-term impacts of the SQE, but I am pleased that the training market is offering affordable ways to qualify when compared to the old LPC route. It's good to see apprentices excelling, but we need to better understand the complex reasons why Black and Asian candidates aren't generally doing as well. We can then identify whether there are steps we can take to address this.'

Other reports we have published include a quality assurance report [<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/sqe-qa-report-21-22/>] and a summary of initial feedback [<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/sqe-year-one/>] from candidates, training providers and law firms. In a snapshot of initial views, feedback on qualifying work experience was generally positive, particularly from candidates. There was a greater mix of views about the SQE, with training providers generally less positive about the SQE than candidates. There is a ten-year evaluation programme to assess the impacts of the SQE.

We have also announced that fees for the SQE are set to increase from September 2023. Our contract with our assessment provider Kaplan allows for an annual inflation-linked increase in fees. The figure used is for October 2022. This means fees will increase by around 11 per cent in 2023/24. The fees will be:

- SQE1: £1,798 (£1,622 - 2022/2023)
- SQE2: £2,766 (£2,493 - 2022/2023)

Paul Philip said: 'We realise any increase in fees won't be welcome, and the impact of high inflation has resulted in a more significant rise this year. We will continue to do all we can to make sure the SQE delivers value for money, and that there continues to be a range of affordable ways to prepare for it.'