

SQE: the story so far

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Background

For thirty years, the path to becoming a solicitor followed a rigid structure. The system worked for some, but the lack of flexibility meant qualifying could be expensive, and some were left stranded, unable to cross the final hurdle into the profession.

Since its launch in September 2021, the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) route has reshaped solicitor training, removed unnecessary barriers and provided more flexibility.

The SQE assessment also makes sure every aspiring solicitor is assessed to the same high standard, regardless of their background or route to qualification.

Before the SQE, aspiring solicitors had to:

- pass a law degree, or a degree in another subject and a law conversion course
- complete a Legal Practice Course (LPC), offered by one of more than 30 providers who wrote and marked the assessments taken by their students
- gain and complete a two-year training contract or period of recognised training with a law firm or other provider of legal services, at the end of which their training principal would decide if they were competent to practise as a solicitor
- be of good character and standing.

Now, aspiring solicitors must:

- pass a degree or an equivalent level 6 qualification in any subject
- pass the SQE assessments – they can decide how they prepare
- gain a total of two years' qualifying work experience (QWE) in one or more of a wide range of possible settings
- be of good character and standing.

The benefits of the SQE route to qualification

Before the SQE, all aspiring solicitors had to pass the LPC and then secure one of a limited number of two-year periods of recognised training (often known as a training contract).

Under the LPC, aspiring solicitors were not all assessed in the same way. The course was assessed by more than 30 providers and pass rates ranged from below 30% to 100%. We were unable to explain the difference in pass rates and had no guarantee all candidates were being assessed to the same standard. Periods of recognised training were difficult to secure, making qualification as much about opportunity as ability.

The downsides of the old system:

- Risk of inconsistent assessment: not all aspiring solicitors were assessed in the same way. With more than 30 providers, pass rates on courses ranged from below 30% to 100%, but there was no clear explanation as to why or assurance that all candidates were being assessed to the same standard.
- Risk of inconsistent approach to training contracts: with more than 2,000 firms offering training, there was a significant risk of inconsistency — both in the quality of the training contracts and the decision around sign off competence.
- Risk around training contracts: periods of recognised training (PRT) were difficult to secure, making qualification as much about opportunity as ability. For instance, able candidates with caring responsibilities or who did not go to a 'prestigious' university could struggle to gain a contract to qualify.
- Cost: the prescriptive approach to the courses and recognised training, meant there was limited scope to reduce the costs of training and a limit to flexibility around earn-

as-you-learn options.



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