

# SQE Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Risk Assessment update on progress (March 2021 to February 2024)

10 April 2024

## Introduction

Introduced in September 2021, the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) is a single, rigorous assessment for all aspiring solicitors. We introduced the SQE to ensure consistent and high standards at the point of admission and to encourage new and diverse pathways to qualifying as a solicitor.

The assessment consists of two parts: SQE1 tests candidates' functioning legal knowledge, while SQE2 tests their practical legal skills. To date, more than 14,500 candidates have taken SQE1, and more than 4,500 candidates have taken SQE2. The tests have been conducted in more than 60 countries.

This is an update on the progress we've made towards fulfilling our commitments in the [SQE Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Risk Assessment](https://rules.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/edi-risk-assessment/) [https://rules.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/edi-risk-assessment/], published in July 2020. It outlines the actions we've taken to address the risks identified in the assessment between March 2021 and February 2024. We also previously [reported on the actions we took between July 2020 and February 2021](https://rules.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/progress-update-2020-2021/) [https://rules.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/progress-update-2020-2021/].

For the first time, this report provides updates on the equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) commitments that were only possible to progress once the SQE went live in September 2021. These include:

- analysing individual questions for patterns of differential performance
- informing candidates of their full SQE results
- gathering evidence on the experiences of candidates and organisations with qualifying work experience (QWE).

The report gives updates on each of the four key areas covered in the 2020 risk assessment:

- fairness
- access
- costs
- quality of training during QWE.

We have also provided an update on our SQE engagement activities with key stakeholders and representative groups.

[Open all \[#\]](#)

## **Fairness**

A key objective of the SQE is to assure consistent, high standards for all qualifying solicitors. Under the old system, the assessment providers (who also provided the training) they had different assessment methods and pass rates, which created uncertainty about whether all newly qualified solicitors had acquired the same levels of knowledge and skills.

With the introduction of the SQE, all aspiring solicitors are now assessed to the same rigorous standards. This makes the process fairer because all candidates are now assessed against the same standard regardless of their training or prior achievement.

We are dedicated to making sure the SQE is a fair assessment for all candidates. In our 2020 EDI Risk Assessment, we committed to the following actions in this area:

- monitoring performance by protected characteristics on an ongoing basis
- analysing individual questions on an ongoing basis to check for patterns of differential performance
- recruiting a diverse assessor team
- ensuring diversity training is mandatory for assessors, markers and question writers
- conducting a full evaluation of the SQE
- engaging with representative groups working in this area
- researching the underlying causes of disparities in performance
- reporting on the profile of SQE candidates and newly qualified solicitors.

We provide updates on each of these commitments below. We also report on our progress in making the SQE available in the Welsh language and that candidates with disabilities have access to assistive technology and reasonable adjustments.

### **Monitoring performance by protected characteristics**

We collect data from all SQE candidates via an online monitoring and maximising diversity survey. Candidates complete this survey before registering for the SQE assessments.

A benefit of the SQE is that it allows us to gather consistent cohort-wide data on the performance of candidates broken down by protected characteristics and socio-economic background. The data collected from

a centralised assessment gives us dependable and comparable evidence on differential performance by group. Under the old qualification route, it was not possible to collect accurate cohort-wide data on the performance of candidates, as each assessment provider used their own assessment methods.

The [post assessment reports and the SQE annual assessment reports](https://sqa.sra.org.uk/exam-arrangements/sqa-reports) [<https://sqa.sra.org.uk/exam-arrangements/sqa-reports>] include data on performance by the protected characteristics of ethnicity, disability, sex, religion or belief, and age. So far, we have found that:

- Candidates who reported being in White or Mixed/multiple ethnic groups achieved higher pass rates than those from an Asian/Asian British or Black/Black British background (this is similar to previous findings in respect to the Legal Practice Course). We have commissioned independent research to help us [better understand the factors that contribute to this disparity](#) [#research].
- There were similar pass rates for candidates who declared a disability and those who did not.
- Candidates in the 25-34 age group (who make up the majority of candidates) achieved higher pass rates than candidates in older age brackets.
- Candidates who reported their sex as male achieved a higher pass rate than female candidates in SQE1. The opposite was the case in SQE2.
- Candidates who reported that their sexual orientation was bi, gay/lesbian or other achieved higher pass rates than heterosexual/straight candidates in SQE1 assessments, but there were no significant differences in SQE2.

## **Analysing individual questions and stations**

After each assessment, all questions and stations are investigated to check for any patterns of differential performance alongside other indicators of performance as part of a routine post assessment validation process. Any elements of an SQE assessment that are flagged by the statistical analysis are given particular attention and are discussed by the SQE Assessment Board.

## **Recruiting a diverse assessor team**

Kaplan, our SQE assessment provider, has set targets and developed an action plan to increase diversity among SQE question writers, markers and assessors. Their latest data shows that diversity by ethnic group is increasing for the pool of SQE examiners overall.

In 2022/23, the diversity by ethnic group increased for SQE1 question writers, SQE2 question writers and SQE solicitor markers. For SQE2

solicitor assessors, the profile remained aligned to the profile of diversity by ethnic group for solicitors in England and Wales.

### **Diversity training for assessors, markers and question writers**

All new solicitor assessors and markers are required to complete Kaplan's equality, diversity and inclusion training before assessing for the first time. The training must be renewed by all assessors and markers on an annual basis.

Kaplan also requires any SQE1 question writers to complete new writer training which includes training on equality and diversity and avoiding gender, ideological, racial, religious, ethnic or other bias in questions. The training also covers stereotyping.

Kaplan's academic subject heads work to avoid bias in questions and so will check for it in the early stages of the question writing process. There are various stages of quality assurance checks where this can also be identified, including at the formal academic review stage and review by Subject Matter Experts appointed by the SRA.

### **The SQE evaluation programme**

We have published a five-phase programme to evaluate the SQE. In phase one, completed in 2021, [an evaluation framework](https://rules.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/evaluation-framework/1) [https://rules.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/evaluation-framework/1] was developed by an external independent consultancy, Pye Tait.

Phase two, completed in March 2023, consisted of an [initial perception study](https://rules.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/sqe-year-one/) [https://rules.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/sqe-year-one/] of both the SQE and QWE. These studies will serve as a baseline for future surveys, allowing us to monitor what is and is not perceived to be working well over time.

Phase three of the programme will consist of an initial evaluation of the SQE, which we will commission later this year. It will include an assessment of the market impacts of our reforms, including any equality impacts.

Phase four of the programme will begin in 2026. During this phase, we plan to produce another perception survey and a further study on the impacts of QWE. We will also commission an independent evaluation of the SQE.

The final phase of our evaluation programme will occur ten years after the SQE's introduction. The findings of earlier phases will shape our plans for this phase, but it will include another full independent evaluation of the reforms.

## **Our engagement with representative groups working in this area**

We have continued to engage with The Law Society and its representative groups, including the Disabled Solicitors Network, Junior Solicitors Network and Ethnic Solicitors Network. Discussions focused on a range of issues related to the SQE exam, such as reasonable adjustments for candidates, assistive technologies and mitigating circumstances.

We have an ongoing dialogue with independent networks that represent solicitors and aspiring solicitors. We have provided bespoke webinars on the SQE to the members of several groups, including the:

- Black Solicitors Network
- Sole Practitioners Group
- British Nigerian Lawyers Forum
- British-Ghanaian Lawyers Union
- Association of British Tamil Lawyers.

These webinars have been designed to provide detailed guidance and answer questions on a range of issues, including:

- qualifications and experience that could equate to a degree
- how to find qualifying work experience
- how to record and confirm QWE
- solicitor apprenticeships
- sources of funding for SQE preparatory training.

## **Researching the underlying causes of differential outcomes in professional assessments**

In December 2021, we commissioned research from the University of Exeter to examine what factors could be influencing the differential outcomes we, and others, have seen in professional assessments. The first phase of this work was completed in June 2023. It was a detailed [review of the literature \[https://rules.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/ethnicity-attainment-gap-legal-professional-assessments/\]](https://rules.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/ethnicity-attainment-gap-legal-professional-assessments/) on differential outcomes by ethnicity in professional assessments.

The review analysed more than 250 academic, government and professional reports and articles from both the UK and international sources. The researchers also consulted with 25 experts, including other academics, regulators and members of the profession. The review has shown that the reasons for differential outcomes in professional assessments are wide and varied, with the key factors beyond the direct control of the candidates themselves.

The second and final phase of the research will provide an in-depth analysis of the influence of these factors on the differential outcomes in

legal professional assessments. The research will use interviews and surveys to examine the lived experiences of aspiring solicitors and past candidates. The final report will be published in spring 2024.

The research has focused on the assessments in place before the SQE was introduced where there was sufficient historical data to undertake meaningful analysis. We anticipate that the findings will be relevant to the SQE, and we will take those findings into account when we do the evaluation programme referenced earlier.

## **Reporting on the profile of SQE candidates and newly qualified solicitors**

The [post assessment reports and the SQE annual assessment reports](https://sqa.sra.org.uk/exam-arrangements/sqa-reports) [https://sqa.sra.org.uk/exam-arrangements/sqa-reports] provide data on the performance of candidates based on:

- their protected characteristics
- the type of school they attended
- whether their parents had a university education
- the occupation of their main household earner when they were around 14
- their highest level of education, and their degree classification.

We also produce an [annual report](https://rules.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/education-training-2021-22/) [https://rules.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/education-training-2021-22/] covering all routes to admission as a solicitor, both the SQE and through the old routes under our transitional provisions.

## **Reasonable adjustments and assistive technology**

We are committed to making sure that candidates with disabilities are not unfairly disadvantaged in demonstrating their competence during assessments. Kaplan considers requests for reasonable adjustments to SQE assessment methods on a case-by-case basis for candidates with disabilities (as defined by the Equality Act 2010). Kaplan also considers requests for adjustments from candidates if they do not have a disability as defined by the Equality Act to accommodate candidates with other conditions which impact on their ability to demonstrate their competence.

Between September 2021 and July 2023, Kaplan implemented more than 1,000 reasonable adjustment plans. The pass rates for candidates who have reasonable adjustment plans are similar to those for the full cohort in all SQE assessments. There is no consistent pattern to suggest that candidates with reasonable adjustments achieved higher or lower pass rates than those without.



Our [Reasonable Adjustments Policy](https://sqa.sra.org.uk/policies/reasonable-adjustment-policy) and dedicated website information outlines our approach to reasonable adjustments in more detail, including the arrangements we frequently make and how we communicate with candidates. Kaplan updated this policy in January 2024 to include the following changes:

- Clarification on how the policy applies to accommodations for those that are not disabled within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010 but have conditions which impact on their ability to undertake the SQE.
- Further information to assist candidates about what should be included in the reasonable adjustments request form.
- Confirmation that a specific member of the Equality & Quality team will be appointed as the candidate's reasonable adjustment liaison (RAL) and more information on the role of the RAL. This is the candidate's main point of contact and reflects our previous practice.

A growing range of assistive technologies have been used, or are available for use, by candidates with disabilities taking the SQE. These technologies include scanning pens, speech recognition software (Dragon), and mini microphones used by oral assessors during interviews and advocacy assessments. The software package Fusion is also available, which includes the screen reader JAWS, allowing for speech tracking while navigating items on the screen, and the option to use a refreshable braille display.

## **SQE in Welsh**

England and Wales is a single legal jurisdiction comprising two nations and two official languages. We support access to legal services in both official languages, and we have committed to offering the SQE in Welsh. Candidates can already choose to take SQE2 in Welsh. From September 2024, SQE1 will also be available in Welsh.

In September 2021, ahead of the introduction of the SQE2 in Welsh, we ran [a pilot with fluent Welsh speakers](https://rules.sra.org.uk/sra/policy/solicitors-qualifying-examination/pilot/sqe-pilots/sqe2-welsh-pilot/) to explore the practicalities of running the assessment in Welsh. We used the findings to inform both our final approach and the development of SQE2 in Welsh. Similarly, in June 2023, [we ran a pilot for SQE1 in Welsh](https://rules.sra.org.uk/sra/policy/solicitors-qualifying-examination/pilot/sqe-pilots/sqe1-welsh-pilot/). The findings from this pilot are informing our approach to delivering SQE1 in Welsh.

Kaplan has recruited a panel of Welsh-speaking solicitors to support the development and delivery of the SQE in Welsh. In addition, Kaplan now also employs two in-house professional Welsh translators who are members of the Cymdeithas Cyfieithwyr Cymru, the professional association for English to/from Welsh translators and interpreters.



We have been working with Canolfan Bedwyr – Bangor University's Centre for Welsh Language Services, Research and Technology – as we develop our approach to translation. Given the complexities around the availability of comparable legal terms in Welsh, any particularly challenging terms in Welsh will be referred to Canolfan Bedwyr. Its experts in legal terminology and Welsh language matters will then conduct further research and confirm or make suggestions as to the term to be used.

We want to make sure that Welsh-speaking aspiring solicitors can make informed choices about which language to sit the SQE assessment in. Therefore we are working on providing helpful information, including knowing what to expect in the exam and what resources will be used. The pilots we have undertaken continue to inform our approach in this area. This is alongside ongoing discussions with Welsh universities and other Welsh stakeholders, including the Welsh Government's legislative translation unit.

In early 2024, we will undertake focus groups with Welsh-speaking students to further develop our understanding. We are also working with Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, Welsh universities and the Law Council Education and Training sub-committee. This is with regards to the issue of SQE preparatory courses in Welsh and the promotion of our SQE Welsh language offer.

In April 2023, in recognition of several diverging areas of law in Wales and England, we published updated versions in English of the SQE1 and SQE2 Assessment Specifications. These make clear our expectations around understanding the laws in England and Wales, how they apply and where they differ. For instance, for Property Practice, candidates need to understand differences in relation to taxation specifically Stamp Duty Land Tax in England and Land Transaction Tax in Wales. We engaged with the Education and Training Committee of the Law Council of Wales and SQE training providers as we developed these changes.

We have undertaken wide-ranging engagement with stakeholders in Wales to discuss the SQE. For example, we have met with local law societies and representatives from the legal sector in Wales. We continue to hold regular meetings with the Law Society in Wales and the Welsh Government. We have also met with Qualifications Wales to understand how other bilingual examinations work in Wales.

## [Access](#)

The SQE has the potential to improve access to qualifying as a solicitor by removing unjustifiable barriers to entry, such as the previous requirement for a period of recognised training lasting at least two years.

Under the SQE, candidates have a lot of flexibility to select training and work experience options best suited to their financial and lifestyle needs.



This could benefit aspiring solicitors from a diverse range of backgrounds.

We are committed to maximising the potential benefits of the SQE for increasing access to qualifying as a solicitor. To that end, we committed to the following actions in the 2020 EDI Risk Assessment for the SQE:

- informing candidates of their full results to aid fair recruitment and help candidates market themselves if they followed a less traditional route to qualification
- adding to our resources that explain the new routes to qualification and tailoring these to the needs of different stakeholder groups
- engaging with training providers to help them understand the benefits of the new system and the role that they can play in creating a competitive and healthy market for SQE training.

We provide updates on each of these commitments below.

### **Informing candidates of their full results**

For each SQE assessment, we provide candidates with the pass mark and their own score, expressed as a scaled score for SQE1 and a percentage for SQE2. We also provide the candidate's quintile score to show where their score stands in comparison to all those who took the assessment at the same time. We offer information to help candidates understand their [SQE1 results](https://sqa.sra.org.uk/exam-arrangements/results-and-resits/understanding-sqe1-results) and their [SQE2 results](https://sqa.sra.org.uk/exam-arrangements/results-and-resits/understanding-sqe2-results) in detail.

Starting in January 2024, candidates receive a breakdown of their marks by practice area for SQE1. This will help them to identify any gaps in their knowledge and plan their future training effectively. Candidates also receive a full breakdown by assessment stations for SQE2.

In January 2024, we moved to week long assessment windows for each of FLK1 and FLK2, improving test centre availability and giving candidates greater flexibility when sitting the exam.

Due to this change, there are now different FLK1 and FLK2 papers in each assessment window. We therefore introduced a system of scaled scoring to enable us to present results in a way that would allow for accurate and fair comparisons between candidates. This means candidate scores can be directly compared, even if they took different papers.

Scaled scoring will enable us to make more accurate comparisons of candidate performance at SQE1 over time and across different sittings. We have provided more information on our website and via [a webinar to help candidates understand scaled scoring](#)



[\[https://www.youtube.com/live/iMUzBmrPaU0?si=LLT1sSXZ\\_XTq7Cff\]](https://www.youtube.com/live/iMUzBmrPaU0?si=LLT1sSXZ_XTq7Cff). We will consider whether a similar approach would be helpful for SQE2.

## **Our resources explaining the new routes to qualification**

We have improved our resources for aspiring solicitors and SQE candidates to include more detailed information, including:

- an overview of all the [training options](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/sqe-training-options/) [\[https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/sqe-training-options/\]](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/sqe-training-options/), including sample pathways and funding options
- information on [solicitor apprenticeships](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/solicitor-apprenticeships/) [\[https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/solicitor-apprenticeships/\]](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/solicitor-apprenticeships/), including a [video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AijjHOKLsaM) [\[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AijjHOKLsaM\]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AijjHOKLsaM) to help aspiring solicitors decide if an apprenticeship is for them
- a list of [providers of SQE preparatory training and SQE study materials](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/sqe-training-options/training-provider-list/) [\[https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/sqe-training-options/training-provider-list/\]](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/sqe-training-options/training-provider-list/)
- a guide to [registering for SQE assessments](https://sqe.sra.org.uk/registering-and-booking/) [\[https://sqe.sra.org.uk/registering-and-booking/\]](https://sqe.sra.org.uk/registering-and-booking/), including information on [reasonable adjustments](https://sqe.sra.org.uk/registering-and-booking/reasonable-adjustments/) [\[https://sqe.sra.org.uk/registering-and-booking/reasonable-adjustments/\]](https://sqe.sra.org.uk/registering-and-booking/reasonable-adjustments/)
- QWE information for both [SQE candidates](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/qualifying-work-experience-candidates/) [\[https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/qualifying-work-experience-candidates/\]](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/qualifying-work-experience-candidates/) and [employers](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/qualifying-work-experience-candidates/qualifying-work-experience-employers/) [\[https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/qualifying-work-experience-candidates/qualifying-work-experience-employers/\]](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/qualifying-work-experience-candidates/qualifying-work-experience-employers/)
- tailored information for [individuals who come within our transitional provisions](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/legal-practice-course-route/becoming-solicitor-legal-practice-course-transitional-requirements/) [\[https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/legal-practice-course-route/becoming-solicitor-legal-practice-course-transitional-requirements/\]](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/legal-practice-course-route/becoming-solicitor-legal-practice-course-transitional-requirements/), and for [qualified lawyers looking to qualify as a solicitor](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/qualified-lawyers/) [\[https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/qualified-lawyers/\]](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/qualified-lawyers/)
- a [Q&A](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/qa/) [\[https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/qa/\]](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/qa/) for aspiring solicitors and candidates on the SQE.

We have also supported The Law Society to provide [information for aspiring solicitors](https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/career-advice/becoming-a-solicitor/solicitors-qualifying-examination-sqe) [\[https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/career-advice/becoming-a-solicitor/solicitors-qualifying-examination-sqe\]](https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/career-advice/becoming-a-solicitor/solicitors-qualifying-examination-sqe) on a range of topics, including:

- SQE costs
- preparatory courses and sources of funding
- QWE
- information for international students and lawyers
- the SQE in Welsh
- solicitor apprenticeships.

## **Our engagement with training providers**

We have held regular meetings with organisations that provide preparatory training for the SQE assessments. These meetings included:



- face-to-face roundtable discussions held between May and November 2022 in Birmingham, Leeds, London, Manchester and Swansea
- a virtual conference in March 2023
- several other virtual meetings.

During these, we discussed various topics in detail with the training providers, including:

- the most recent SQE Independent Reviewer report and Kaplan's annual SQE report
- what we've learnt so far about supporting SQE candidates, including performance by practice area and use of the SQE sample questions
- an update on QWE
- proposals to publish SQE data on candidate performance
- a review of the [SQE1 assessment specification](https://sqa.sra.org.uk/exam-arrangements/assessment-information/sqe1-assessment-specification) [<https://sqa.sra.org.uk/exam-arrangements/assessment-information/sqe1-assessment-specification>], including our expectations of candidates regarding Welsh law
- changes to the timing of SQE1 results
- changes to SQE1 delivery from January 2024.

We have recently published more sample SQE questions in response to feedback from candidates and training providers. We also talk regularly to training providers to help with capacity planning for future SQE assessments, including regular detailed capacity planning surveys which we ask training providers to complete.

## **Costs**

Under the old system, qualifying as a solicitor was often an expensive process, disadvantaging less affluent students. The Legal Practice Course (LPC) alone can cost up to £16,750. In our 2020 EDI Risk Assessment for the SQE, we anticipated that the SQE could help to reduce this cost for some candidates. We suggested that by removing the requirement for a specific course, the SQE could promote the emergence of different training products at a wider range of price points.

It's too soon to draw definitive conclusions about the impact of the SQE on the legal education and training market. However, there are early indications that the assessment has had a positive effect on the range of options available and the cost of qualifying.

In February 2023, we published information on the developing SQE training market. It showed that the range of SQE preparation courses that did not lead to an academic award were mostly within the price range of £500 - £4,500. For those leading to an academic award at a degree or postgraduate level, they were within the price range of £7,500 - £13,000.

For many of these options, the combined cost of training and [the SQE exams](https://sqa.sra.org.uk/about-sqa/costs-and-fees) [https://sqa.sra.org.uk/about-sqa/costs-and-fees] are below those for the LPC under the former system. Several training providers also allow candidates to spread the cost of their SQE preparation courses over instalments. We published new data on [training costs and options as part of our SQE training provider list](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqa/sqa-training-options/training-provider-list/) [https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqa/sqa-training-options/training-provider-list/] in March 2024 and will explore this issue further in our three-year evaluation starting in autumn 2024.

## **Informing candidate choice**

As part of the 2020 EDI risk assessment, we committed to publishing resources to help candidates navigate the range of training options available. To that end, we updated our [resources to help aspiring solicitors when considering a training provider](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqa/sqa-training-options/choosing-sqa-training-provider/) [https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqa/sqa-training-options/choosing-sqa-training-provider/] in October 2023. The resources outline the types of questions or information an aspiring solicitor may want to consider or obtain when choosing a provider.

Our SQE training provider list has been updated to better help aspiring solicitors understand the range of SQE preparation courses available. We have included more information including cost, length of course, how the course is delivered and who it is aimed at. During 2024, we will continue to engage with aspiring solicitors and organisations to highlight our resources and learn how we can further inform candidate choice.

We remain committed to publishing further data to help potential SQE candidates decide how best to prepare for the assessments. This includes linking candidate outcomes with the training they told us they had undertaken.

By publishing this data, we will support the wider objectives of the SQE. It will help aspiring solicitors to navigate the training options available and identify the best options for them individually. It will address some of the issues raised by the [Bridge Group in their March 2017 report](https://rules.sra.org.uk/globalassets/documents/sra/research/monitoring-maximising-diversity.pdf?version=4a1ace) [https://rules.sra.org.uk/globalassets/documents/sra/research/monitoring-maximising-diversity.pdf?version=4a1ace], who said publishing this data could help stakeholders monitor diversity and drive positive action within the profession.

Data on candidate performance by provider should also incentivise providers to deliver good quality preparatory courses. And we want to support a market which provides a range of choices for candidates.

Our intention is to break the data down by specific courses or types of courses where we have sufficient data to do so. And to encourage users of the data to take the range of courses and information about them into account when using it. We also intend to make the data available in a way that enables users to view candidate performance by providers by multiple data categories.

The SQE training market is rapidly developing with many providers offering more than one course. It is important that any data we publish about candidate performance by provider covers the wide range of training courses available. And that candidate performance is appropriately contextualised, where possible.

For example, some courses may have very high pass rates. But it may be that a provider has imposed entry requirements so that only those most likely to pass are able to take those courses. And other courses might have lower pass rates, but the pass rates might be much higher than one might expect from the prior attainment of those taking those courses. Also, if a small number of candidates have taken a specific course, publishing performance data for that course could inadvertently identify a candidate or a small group of candidates.

We are mindful of these challenges and any unintended consequences on choice and the SQE training market. At present, we do not have enough data to publish information that could be helpful, given the wide range of training options available. However, the number of candidates taking the SQE is increasing significantly, especially for SQE1, which means that our data bank will grow over time. We plan to review the data after each sitting in 2024 to determine whether it is large enough to inform a useful publication.

We also continue to explore the types of data we could publish to best contextualise candidate performance and to help aspiring solicitors engage with the data.

As we develop our approach, we will continue to engage with training providers and aspiring solicitors. We will also explore alternative ways we can support candidates identify the options that might suit them best.

We will make granular data available to approved researchers for further analysis which may increase further understanding of the causes of disparities in candidate performance.

## **Solicitor apprenticeships**

Aspiring solicitors in England can qualify through a solicitor apprenticeship. This provides a cost-effective alternative to the traditional qualification route through university and may suit candidates who want to 'earn as they learn'. Costs of training and assessments are paid for through the apprenticeship levy fund, so there is no cost to candidates. Some employers also offer solicitor apprenticeships to individuals who have already completed some training, for example a degree. We provided [a webinar to help aspiring solicitors decide if an apprenticeship is for them](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AijjHOKLsaM) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AijjHOKLsaM].

The solicitor apprenticeship has proven to be a popular and successful way to qualify. Data from the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical

Education shows that the number of individuals commencing solicitor apprenticeships has grown rapidly. Here are the number of people who have started on a solicitor apprenticeship:

- 222 in 2020/21
- 584 in 2021/22
- 777 in 2022/23

By July 2023, this brings the total number of solicitor apprentices on the path to qualification to 2,132.

Between October 2022 and July 2023, nearly 400 solicitor apprentices sat SQE assessments, out of around 8,000 candidates. Apprentices have performed well on the SQE, with higher-than-average pass rates for both SQE1 and SQE2. This indicates that the experience and learning on the apprenticeship route is often good preparation for the SQE assessments.

### **Quality of training during qualifying work experience**

Under the SQE, aspiring solicitors must complete two years of full-time (or equivalent) QWE to qualify. Candidates can complete their QWE in up to four organisations that provide legal services, whether or not we regulate them. Previously, aspiring solicitors had to complete a two-year period of recognised training (PRT) in an organisation we authorised to provide the training. A PRT is often known as a training contract. We introduced QWE in part to remove unjustifiable barriers to qualifying as a solicitor and to give more opportunities to gain legal work experience that would count towards qualification.

During the SQE's development, concerns were raised that introducing QWE could lead to irresponsible employers hiring candidates without providing appropriate training or exploiting them by making them work without pay. To understand whether these concerns have materialised, we have committed to gathering evidence on the experiences of candidates and organisations with QWE on an annual basis.

In November 2022, we conducted an initial survey to gather information about perceptions and experiences of the SQE and QWE. We [published a report](https://rules.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/sqe-year-one/) on the survey findings in March 2023. The following year, we conducted our second annual survey, asking the same QWE questions as the initial survey conducted. Notable results of this second survey included:

- Nearly 90% of candidates were very satisfied or satisfied with the supervision during their QWE, a 5 percentage point increase from the initial survey.
- More than 90% of candidates agreed or strongly agreed that their QWE had helped them develop the competences they need to practise effectively as a solicitor.



- Ninety-three percent of candidates said that they were exposed to a broad range of competences during their QWE, a 14 percentage point increase from the initial survey.

We also asked candidates about their use of the [QWE training template](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/qualifying-work-experience-candidates/qwe-training-template/) [https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/qualifying-work-experience-candidates/qwe-training-template/] that we provide, and over half of the respondents said they had used it. Of those, more than 80% found the template to be helpful or very helpful.

We published a full report on this latest [survey in April 2024](https://rules.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/qualifying-work-experience-survey-findings/) [https://rules.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/qualifying-work-experience-survey-findings/].

We have also developed resources to assist candidates who are seeking QWE. Our [web resources](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/qualifying-work-experience-candidates/) [https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/qualifying-work-experience-candidates/] include [questions and answers](https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/qualifying-work-experience-candidates/qa/) [https://rules.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/qualifying-work-experience-candidates/qa/] for both candidates and paralegal staff who want to know if their current work can count as QWE. We have worked with The Law Society to support its resources on QWE, such as their [blog and short videos for those seeking QWE](https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/topics/blogs/sqe-myth-buster-6-common-misconceptions-about-qualifying-work-experience/) [https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/topics/blogs/sqe-myth-buster-6-common-misconceptions-about-qualifying-work-experience/].

We offer guidance and support to candidates if an employer refuses to confirm their QWE, including through our helpline. We have also published [guidance to support employers](https://rules.sra.org.uk/solicitors/guidance/colps-confirming-qualifying-work-experience/) [https://rules.sra.org.uk/solicitors/guidance/colps-confirming-qualifying-work-experience/] and [guidance on our expectations for firms on providing good QWE](https://rules.sra.org.uk/solicitors/guidance/meeting-standards-good-qualifying-work-experience/) [https://rules.sra.org.uk/solicitors/guidance/meeting-standards-good-qualifying-work-experience/].

## **Engagement**

Since March 2021, we have continued to engage with key stakeholders and representative groups through events, webinars, conferences and our website. We have produced 33 videos on the SQE and QWE, which have received approximately 56,700 views in total. We have hosted virtual SQE conferences since 2020.

In 2023, the conference topics included how to support SQE candidates, confirming QWE and using SQE sample questions. To date, the 2023 virtual conference has received roughly 6,000 on-demand views. We ran the [latest virtual SQE conference](https://rules.sra.org.uk/sra/news/events/on-demand-events/sqe-conference-2024/) [https://rules.sra.org.uk/sra/news/events/on-demand-events/sqe-conference-2024/] in March 2024.

We have a regular SQE market stall at both our annual Compliance Officers Conference and at LegalEx, the UK's largest free-to-attend legal event, where we answer questions from aspiring solicitors and other interested individuals.

We regularly publish a dedicated SQE Update bulletin, which now has

approximately 5,300 email subscribers. Since March 2021, we have published 26 of these bulletins to provide updates on the latest SQE news. Online, we have had more than 1.4 million visits to our SQE-related web pages.

On social media, our SQE-related posts have received approximately 84,000 engagements and 2.2 million impressions since March 2021. Our SQE LinkedIn group has more than 4,700 members, providing stakeholders with updates on the latest news about the SQE and QWE and the opportunity to ask us questions directly.

We also run the Career in Law Facebook and Instagram pages, which have a combined total of more than 5,600 followers across both platforms. This provides tailored information to aspiring solicitors about the SQE exams and qualifying. As part of our social media engagement strategy, we have run dedicated campaigns on the following:

- the SQE training market
- SQE exam dates and booking information
- SQE resources and information, including assessment specifications and sample questions
- recording QWE
- our degree validation process.

## Next steps

We will continue to work to meet our EDI commitments for the SQE and QWE. This year, we will commission an initial independent evaluation of the SQE, which will provide an opportunity to get some early insights into some of the equality impacts of our reforms.

As part of this evaluation, we will assess the market consequences of the SQE and QWE, including their effects on the cost of training and qualification. We will also continue to collect evidence on perceptions and experiences of QWE on an annual basis.

In spring 2024, University of Exeter will publish the final report of its research on differences in outcomes for ethnic groups in legal professional assessments. This will help us better understand the factors that contribute to disparities in candidate performance by ethnicity. And we will identify and take forward any actions we can take in relation to the SQE to reduce them.

We will continue to monitor performance in the SQE by protected characteristics on an ongoing basis to check for patterns of differential performance. Work is also ongoing to introduce further assistive technologies for candidates with disabilities in 2024.

We are committed to ensuring that the SQE is a fair assessment for all candidates. Therefore, we will continue to review the EDI impacts of our



reforms on an ongoing basis and engage with representative groups and other key stakeholders working in this area.