

Experiences of qualifying work experience: survey findings

10 April 2024

Introduction

Introduced in September 2021, the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) is a centralised assessment that anyone who wants to become a solicitor in England and Wales must pass. We introduced the SQE to give assurance of consistent, high standards at the point of admission and to encourage new and diverse pathways to qualifying as a solicitor.

All candidates qualifying through the SQE route must complete two years' full-time (or equivalent) qualifying work experience (QWE). Candidates can complete QWE in up to four organisations that provide legal services, whether we regulate them or not.

Under the old system, aspiring solicitors had to complete a two-year period of recognised training (PRT) in an organisation we authorise to provide the training. A PRT is often known as a training contract.

The aim of the change from PRT to QWE was to remove unjustifiable barriers to qualifying as a solicitor. And to give aspiring solicitors more opportunities to gain legal work experience that would count towards qualification.

We have committed to a ten-year evaluation programme to assess the impact of the SQE and QWE. The first phase involved the [publication of an evaluation framework](https://higher-rights.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/evaluation-framework/) [https://higher-rights.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/evaluation-framework/] developed by an external, independent consultancy, Pye Tait.

In the second phase, we conducted a baseline survey in November 2022 to gather information about initial perceptions and experiences of the SQE and QWE. We published a report on [the survey findings](https://higher-rights.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/sqe-year-one/) [https://higher-rights.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/sqe-year-one/] in March 2023.

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[Second annual QWE survey](#)

In our evaluation framework, we also committed to gathering perceptions and experiences of QWE on an annual basis. In November 2023, we conducted our second annual survey, asking the same QWE questions as we did in the baseline survey. This was to help us understand and monitor how experiences of QWE are evolving as the reforms become embedded.



The questionnaire was emailed to QWE applicants who had completed any period of QWE since 1 September 2021. In addition, the questionnaire link was included in the SQE Update bulletin, which is sent to more than 5,000 subscribers. This includes academics, education training providers, SQE candidates, qualified lawyers and HR/recruitment staff in law firms. We also promoted it to legal firms, organisations and candidates through our social media channels. Furthermore, it was included in SRA Update, which is sent to all solicitors on the roll.

This report summarises the main findings of the survey and identifies any changes in how candidates and organisations are experiencing QWE. Many of the results have remained similar across both years, but there have been several notable developments:

- an increase in the proportion of candidates reporting that it was easy or very easy to secure QWE
- an increase in the proportion of candidates reporting some or all of their QWE was confirmed
- an increase in candidate satisfaction with the supervision they received during QWE
- an increase in the proportion of organisations saying they did not include or plan to include any preparatory SQE training in their QWE schemes
- an increase in the proportion of candidates saying it was difficult or very difficult to have their QWE confirmed (QWE must be confirmed by a solicitor of England and Wales or compliance officer for legal practice)
- an increase in the proportion of organisations saying they paid or planned to pay their QWE candidates a salary or a salary plus additional expenses
- a decline in the proportion of candidates reporting undertaking unpaid QWE.

At the time of the survey, just over 5,000 QWE applications have been recorded with us. We expect this number to increase substantially over the next few years. We will continue to closely monitor candidates' experiences.

We will continue to track experiences with QWE on an annual basis. We will also monitor perceptions and experiences with the SQE every two years to see how views of the assessment change over time as it becomes embedded.

The next survey will collate experiences and perceptions of both QWE and the SQE and will form part of the three-year evaluation of the SQE, starting later this year.

Respondents

280 respondents completed our questionnaire, including:

- 171 candidates who have taken, or are planning to take the SQE
- 61 respondents from law firms
- 48 respondents from other organisations (including education and training providers and other legal service providers).

Candidates' experiences of QWE

Almost all candidates who completed the survey said that they had undertaken some or all of their QWE.

Just over 80% had undertaken more than the required two years. While nearly 70% said that they had completed or planned to complete all their QWE in one placement.

Candidates told us where they had done some or all of their QWE. They were able to choose from multiple options as they can complete QWE in up to four organisations:

- over 80% said that they had done it in law firms
- nearly two thirds in other private sector organisations
- nearly 50% in public sector organisations
- 28% in a student law clinic.

Undertaking QWE before or after the SQE

In line with the initial survey findings, the majority of respondents completed or planned to complete all or some of QWE before taking SQE1 and SQE2.

Eleven candidates indicated they had not completed or did not plan to complete any QWE before SQE1. The main reasons for this were either that they did not have to take SQE1 because they were qualifying under the [transitional arrangements](https://higher-rights.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/legal-practice-course-route/becoming-solicitor-legal-practice-course-transitional-requirements/) [https://higher-rights.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/legal-practice-course-route/becoming-solicitor-legal-practice-course-transitional-requirements/], or they found it difficult to secure QWE placements before sitting SQE1. Just three candidates did not complete or plan to complete any QWE before taking SQE2.

Around 60% of candidates stated they had completed some or all of their QWE in a previous role.

Securing QWE

Forty-one per cent of candidates told us that it was easy or very easy to secure QWE, an increase of 10 percentage points compared with the initial survey results. However, just over 20% said that it was difficult or very difficult and a similar number said it was neither easy nor difficult.

The three most selected reasons (from a given list) given by those who found it difficult to secure QWE placements were:

- there was a lot of competition for QWE
- there was a lack of knowledge about QWE among legal service providers
- it was hard to find QWE in their local area.

We asked candidates to identify the three most important factors to them (from a list of eight) when seeking QWE. The highest number of 'first' rankings were:

- practice area
- desire to work for the provider
- evidence that a provider's QWE covers a broad range of competences in our [statement of solicitor competence](https://higher-rights.sra.org.uk/solicitors/resources-archived/continuing-competence/cpd/competence-statement/) [https://higher-rights.sra.org.uk/solicitors/resources-archived/continuing-competence/cpd/competence-statement/].

Length of placement and provider location received the least first rankings.

Other factors important to candidates when seeking QWE were:

- workplace culture, in particular around reasonable adjustments and equality, diversity and inclusion
- candidate support, including supervision and training
- remote and flexible working options.

Ninety per cent told us they completed or planned to complete only paid QWE, a 13 percentage point increase from the initial survey. Just seven candidates said they completed or plan to complete unpaid QWE where no expenses are covered. The main reason given for completing or planning to complete unpaid experience was undertaking QWE with a voluntary organisation or student law clinic.

Satisfaction with QWE

As with the 2022 survey, approximately 90% of candidates who had completed some QWE said they were very satisfied or satisfied with it. Only 3% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. The remainder were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

Nearly 90% of candidates were also very satisfied or satisfied with the supervision during their QWE, a five percentage point increase from the initial survey. Only 4% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

Over 90% of candidates agreed or strongly agreed that their QWE had helped them develop the competences they need to practise effectively

as a solicitor. The others neither agreed nor disagreed. No candidates disagreed.

Ninety-three per cent 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. The main reasons for why the remainder had not been exposed to a broad range were:

- their experience was in a specialist area of practice
- not having yet completed enough of their QWE.

Confirming QWE

Ninety per cent of candidates informed us that some or all of their QWE had been confirmed. Almost 75% said the process of getting their QWE confirmed was easy or very easy - up seven percentage points compared with the initial survey.

By contrast, 17% said the process was difficult or very difficult, a four percentage point increase from the initial survey. We will monitor responses to this question closely in future QWE surveys to see whether this result is part of a wider trend.

The three main reasons given by the candidates who found the process of getting their QWE confirmed difficult were:

- the QWE provider did not understand the requirements they need to meet to confirm QWE
- the provider did not want to confirm their QWE because they did not want to employ them as a solicitor (rather than as eg a paralegal).
- they had completed QWE in a previous role, and it was hard to get in touch with the relevant organisation/individual.

Over 50% of candidates said they had used our template to record their QWE. Of these, over 80% said the template was helpful or very helpful.

Organisations' experiences of QWE

This section summarises responses from all organisations surveyed, including law firms, education and training providers and other legal service providers.

Benefits and challenges for organisations

We asked organisations if and how QWE had benefited them. The most frequently selected benefits from a given list were (in order of frequency):

- being able to develop existing employees (eg paralegals)



- QWE is simpler to provide than a PRT
- being able to provide work experience to aspiring solicitors for the first time
- that QWE does not require them to assess competence to practise as a solicitor.

We also asked organisations whether QWE had created any challenges for them. In line with the previous year, over a third of organisations said they had not experienced any challenges. Among those that reported facing challenges, the most selected challenges from a given list were (in order of frequency):

- not being able to employ any or all their paralegals as solicitors after confirming their work experience as QWE
- QWE is too new
- they did not understand the requirements of QWE.

A small number of organisations shared concerns that the QWE system would lead to a lowering of standards compared to the old PRT system, as it is less structured.

Moving from PRT to QWE

Approximately 75% of organisations said they had provided PRTs as part of the old route to qualifying as a solicitor between September 2021 and September 2023. More than 50% of those still providing PRTs said they did not know when they would stop. Only one organisation said they planned to continue doing so for at least five years.

Structured QWE schemes

Approximately 40% of organisations said they have already recruited candidates onto a structured QWE scheme, a 14 percentage point increase from the initial survey. A further 11% said they planned to do so in the next 12-24 months. Consistent with the initial survey, 23% had no plans to recruit candidates onto a structured QWE scheme. Just over 25% said they did not know.

Some organisations recruited or planned to recruit candidates onto a structured QWE scheme but had not provided PRTs under the old route. They gave the following reasons why (from a given list):

- QWE helps them to develop existing talent within their organisation (eg paralegals)
- they support the introduction of QWE
- they could not meet the regulatory requirements to provide a PRT under the old route to qualifying as a solicitor.

Supporting candidates during QWE

We asked organisations whether they delivered or planned to deliver preparatory training for the SQE as part of their structured QWE schemes. More than 50% said they did or planned to do so for both SQE1 and SQE2. A further 7% said they delivered or planned to deliver preparatory training for one of SQE1 or SQE2.

Approximately 20% said they did not deliver or plan to deliver any preparatory training in their QWE schemes. By comparison, no organisation said this in the initial survey. We will monitor this result closely in future QWE surveys to see if this year's result is part of a wider trend.

We also asked organisations whether they cover or plan to cover costs associated with sitting the SQE as part of their QWE schemes. Among those that responded, the majority said they covered or planned to cover the full training costs and fees for both SQE1 and SQE2, along with associated expenses. A small number of organisations said they covered or planned to cover partial costs. These results are similar to the initial survey.

Nearly 80% of organisations said they paid or planned to pay their QWE candidates a salary or a salary plus additional expenses, compared with 53% in the initial survey. Seven per cent said their QWE is or would be unpaid (a similar figure to last year), and 14% did not know. Of the five organisations who provided unpaid QWE, one was a law firm, three were training providers and one was a public sector/not-for-profit organisation that provides legal services.

Employing solicitors who complete QWE elsewhere

Nearly 50% of the respondents from legal service providers said they would employ solicitors who qualified by completing QWE at another organisation. Around a third said they did not know.

Nine per cent said they would, but the solicitor would have to undertake some work experience with the organisation first, even if they were fully qualified.

Five per cent said they would not employ a newly qualified solicitor who had completed their QWE elsewhere, compared with 9% in the initial survey. These 13 organisations selected the following reasons why from a given list (in order of frequency):

- to make sure they have the competences needed to practise as a solicitor
- concerns about the quality of QWE completed elsewhere
- to train them in the culture of the organisation
- to make sure they understand the organisation's areas of practice
- they practise in specialist areas of law.

Requiring candidates to pass the SQE before starting QWE

Just under 40% of organisations said they do not require candidates to pass either SQE1 or SQE2 before beginning QWE. Twenty per cent said they require candidates to pass both SQE1 and SQE2 before starting QWE, and 10% said they require candidates to pass only SQE1. These figures are similar to the initial survey.

The organisations that require candidates to pass SQE1, or both SQE1 and SQE2, before starting QWE provided the following reasons why (in order of frequency):

- It helps candidates get more out of their QWE.
- It reduces the risks to the organisation of providing QWE.
- The organisation does not think candidates should be able to complete QWE before SQE1 and/or SQE2.
- It makes it easier to supervise candidates when they complete QWE with us.

(They were able to select multiple reasons from a list.)

Preparing candidates for practice

Seventy per cent of organisations said their QWE allows candidates to develop a broad range of competencies in all sections of our statement of solicitor competence, an increase of eight percentage points from the initial survey.

Almost 20% of organisations said their QWE exposes candidates to a broad range of competences in some, but not all, sections of our statement of solicitor competence. The remaining said they did not know.

The organisations that do not expose candidates to all sections provided the following reasons why (in order of frequency):

- the specialist nature of their work means they cannot expose candidates
- they do not have the resources to expose candidates to all competencies
- their QWE placements are not long enough to expose candidates to all competencies.

Confirming QWE

We asked organisations to tell us if they had ever refused to confirm work experience as QWE. The results were:

- more than 50% said they had never done so.



- nine per cent said they had refused to confirm work experience as QWE.
- one-third said the question did not apply to them.

These results are similar to those of the initial survey.

Organisations gave the following reasons from a list for refusing to confirm work experience as QWE (in order of frequency):

- concerns about the quality of work completed by the candidate(s)
- concerns about character and suitability to be a solicitor
- a lack of evidence about the work that was completed
- too much time had passed since the work was completed
- concerns about competence to practise as a solicitor.

Next steps

These results provide insights into how candidates' and organisations' experiences of QWE are evolving. There have been several notable developments since our initial perceptions survey in November 2022, including an increase in candidates' satisfaction with the supervision they receive during QWE and an increase in candidates reporting that it was easy to secure QWE.

We will continue to conduct further QWE and SQE surveys to track how these experiences change over time and to gather more evidence on the impacts of these reforms.

We will also commission an independent three-year evaluation of the SQE later this year, which will include an initial evaluation of the market impacts of our reforms, including any equality impacts. As part of this, we will collate and analyse in more depth the evidence we have gathered so far on the wider impact of QWE.

Over the last 12 months, we have engaged with a range of stakeholders to help increase understanding of the benefits of QWE and our requirements. We will build on this activity during 2024 by delivering webinars, face-to-face events and promoting our QWE guidance for [organisations](https://higher-rights.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/qualifying-work-experience-candidates/qualifying-work-experience-employers/) [https://higher-rights.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/qualifying-work-experience-candidates/qualifying-work-experience-employers/] and [individuals](https://higher-rights.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/qualifying-work-experience-candidates/) [https://higher-rights.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/sqe/qualifying-work-experience-candidates/].

We recognise that there may still be some confusion around confirming QWE. We will engage with solicitors and employers to clarify our expectations about when QWE should and should not be confirmed.

We will also continue to monitor calls to our QWE helpline and support individuals who may be facing difficulties in getting their QWE confirmed.

We will do this by engaging with organisations offering QWE to explain our requirements.