

barbri®

Your Future- Proofed Firm

A Practical Guide to SQE
Planning and Success

ATTRACT TALENT. BUILD LEADERS.
SECURE LONG-TERM GROWTH.



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Your Future-Ready Firm

Early careers teams are under pressure to find the right talent, innovate and develop future leaders to drive growth and success of the firm – all with limited time and resources. There's no single blueprint for SQE success – but there is practical support from early adopters who are already reaping the rewards.

This guide shares what we've learnt from working with SME law firms across the UK – practical steps, real examples and simple ways to turn the SQE into something that supports your team, strengthens your firm and aligns with your goals.

BARBRI is here to help, whether you're just starting out or ready to take the next step.

1993

Legal Practice Course (LPC) introduced as the vocational stage of solicitor qualification in England and Wales.

September 2021

SQE introduced as a new, centralised route to qualification. Transitional period for candidates who started a qualifying law degree, GDL or LPC before 21 September 2021, ends December 2032.

2022 Onwards

Growing adoption of the SQE route by firms, universities and training providers.

31 December 2032

LPC transitional arrangements end. The SQE will become the sole route to qualify as a solicitor in England & Wales.

2017

Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) confirms plans to introduce the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE).

November 2021

The first SQE1 assessment ran on 8 and 11 November 2021, with the first SQE2 assessment between 11 - 29 April 2022.

2025

For most students graduating in 2025, and future graduates, the SQE is the only available pathway to qualification.

Why Standing Still Is Not an Option

For new graduates in 2025, the Solicitors Qualifying Exam (SQE) is now the only route to qualification. The Legal Practice Course (LPC) remains available until 2032 under transitional arrangements – but only for those who began a law degree, GDL or equivalent before September 2021. For law firms, this shift isn't just about compliance – it's an opportunity to position your firm for long-term success.

Firms that act now to implement a clear SQE strategy will be better placed to:

1. Attract the best candidates
2. Develop future leaders
3. Stay competitive in a fast-changing legal market
4. Meet the regulatory shift



Forward-thinking firms aren't waiting.



Get Ahead, or Get Left Behind

Firms adopting the SQE early are rethinking what it means to build high-performing legal teams. From expanding access to embedding future-facing skills, these firms are reshaping the pathway to qualification and long-term leadership.

They're not waiting for the market to change – they're leading that change.

Request a Call



The Stats Say It All¹

- 82%** of SME firms struggle to attract and recruit talent
- 48%** face challenges retaining people – driven by Gen Z expectations for flexibility, purpose, wellbeing and salary expectations
- 44%** say a lack of information is holding them back from transitioning to the SQE
- 35%** don't have a formal learning and development programme in place

¹See our BARBRI Barometer: SME Law Firm Report 2024

What Does a Future-Ready Firm Look Like?

01

Makes Qualification Part of the Business Strategy

Future-ready firms don't treat the SQE as an admin task, they design qualification pathways that strengthen performance, protect billable time and support business growth.

02

Competes for Talent on More Than Salary

By using the SQE to offer flexibility, support and clearer development, these firms attract smart, ambitious people, even when they can't outspend the competition.

03

Builds Commercially Capable Trainees from Day One

Work-ready means more than just passing exams. These firms develop communication and client-handling skills and commercial awareness early on, which reduces risk and increases value across the business.

04

Makes Tech Confidence a Standard, Not a Niche

Future-ready firms give trainees a foundational understanding of how to apply AI and digital skills in practice – not just learning tools, but how to use them ethically, accurately and with professional judgment. With structured learning built in, trainees gain the digital confidence they need to work smartly, safely and effectively from day one.

05

Tracks Development Like It Tracks Billing

They don't guess who's progressing, they measure it. Through coaching, detailed reporting and feedback, these firms stay close to trainee performance, reducing hidden costs and development gaps that impact long-term value for the individual and the business.

Understanding Gen Z (And Why It Matters)

Attracting early talent today isn't just about salary or benefits, it's about how well you understand the way the next generation learns, works and develops. Gen Z is ambitious, digitally fluent and wants structure, support and space to succeed.

IN A RECENT BARBRI STUDENT SURVEY,

36%

said they have **individual learning needs**, highlighting just how important it is to create a qualification journey that **works for them**, not just the firm.



Here's What This Generation is Looking For²:



Flexibility:

Their top priority is work/life balance, so having an SQE programme that fits around their workload and offers flexible ways to study is essential.



Purpose:

86% say having a sense of purpose is key to job satisfaction, and many consider how a firm's ethics align with their own. Communicating your values clearly can help attract and retain talent that wants to grow with you.



Wellbeing:

Only 51% rate their mental health as good or very good, so development programmes that offer regular check-ins, coaching and wellbeing support can help reduce stress and boost engagement.

²2024 Gen Z and Millennial Survey

**Diversity and impact:**

75% consider societal impact and 72% review environmental policies before joining a firm – visible commitments to inclusion and sustainability matter.

**Digital readiness:**

Nearly 60% believe they'll need to re-skill due to AI. Embedding tech and digital confidence early helps future-proof their careers.

**Financial support:**

30% feel financially insecure with over 50% living from paycheck to paycheck. Offering clear funding options and access to financial support is key to making qualification more accessible, and helping the best talent progress.

**Learning formats:**

They expect learning that's flexible, digital and easy to engage with. Over 50% report high stress and limited time, so varied, bite-sized content helps them stay focused and in control of their learning.



Firms that understand and support these priorities are seeing stronger engagement, better performance and improved retention.

BARBRI's SQE programmes are designed to reflect these needs with flexible learning, wellbeing support and real-world skill development built in.

Future-ready firms use the SQE as part of a wider shift in how they attract, develop and retain the next generation of legal talent. From flexible study to skills-focused support, they're building qualification pathways that reflect what tomorrow's lawyers need (and expect) to thrive.

[Talk to BARBRI About Building Your SQE Strategy](#)

SQE Roadblocks and How to Overcome Them

You're not alone. Many small and medium-sized (SME) firms face common barriers when it comes to the SQE, from concerns about pass rates and funding to confusion around QWE and learner support. The firms making the most progress are those thinking long-term, asking the right questions now, upskilling their people and partnering where it counts.

1

Confidence in the SQE

From low pass rate headlines to early implementation hurdles, the SQE has had mixed press, and that's left some firms cautious about making the leap.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON:



Choose a provider with a proven track record, clear learner support and employer visibility. When firms understand what the exams involve and how learners are progressing, confidence follows.

2

Market Myths & Misconceptions

Does the GDL still matter? Is the SQE harder than the LPC? Can you still offer training contracts? Misinformation and mixed messages continue to delay decisions.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON:



Get clear on the basics – routes in, what's required, and what's changed. Trusted providers will walk you through the facts and help you shape an approach that fits.

3

Understanding QWE

Qualifying Work Experience (QWE) is one of the biggest changes, and still one of the most misunderstood. How long should it be? What counts? And who signs it off?

WHAT TO FOCUS ON:

- Review what you already offer as many firms find their current approach maps closely to QWE with only minor tweaks – clarity and documentation is key.

4

Studying While Working

Most SQE learners are studying alongside full-time roles, which adds pressure if support isn't built in.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON:

- Choose a programme structure that flexes around work peaks and individual study needs. Support might include protected study time, adjusted workloads during exams, or clear boundaries between work and study. Structured flexibility promotes better performance, stronger retention and lower stress.

5

Understanding the Costs

Supporting qualification is a smart investment – but many firms are unclear on how to structure and communicate the costs involved. From prep courses and exams to study leave and re-sits, having a clear funding strategy matters.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON:

- Define what your firm will cover, whether fully or partially, including prep courses, exam fees, travel and study time. Consider how and when you'll fund it, for instance direct payment, phased reimbursement, or training bonds for retention. A transparent funding model builds trust, supports inclusion and helps you stand out in a competitive talent market.

6

Tracking Progress

Without employer oversight, it's easy to lose visibility. How do you know if someone's struggling before it's too late to intervene?

WHAT TO FOCUS ON:

- Work with providers who offer adaptive tools, personalised dashboards and real-time progress tracking. This helps you stay close to development needs – supporting all learners, including those with individual learning needs, before issues escalate.

7

What Happens If Someone Fails?

In an ideal world, every candidate would pass first time. But even with the right support, resits do happen, and without a clear plan firms can face disruption to pipeline, budgets and morale.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON:

- Build contingency into your programme from the outset. Factoring in timelines, re-sit costs and additional support helps ensure one setback doesn't derail the wider strategy.

8

Bridging the Work-Readiness Gap

Passing the SQE is one milestone, but firms also need trainees who can contribute confidently and deliver in real-world settings from day one. That means bridging the gap between legal knowledge and professional performance.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON:

- Work-readiness is now a critical part of future-proofing your talent pipeline. Leading firms are embedding wider skills development into their approach, including communication and negotiation, advocacy, digital confidence, self-management and business development to help trainees perform, progress and deliver real value from the start.

9

Structuring Your SQE Programme

With multiple pathways available, from front-loaded learning to work-alongside models, knowing how to structure your SQE programme isn't always straightforward. Every firm has different business needs, trainee profiles and team pressures to balance.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON:

- Start by mapping your existing recruitment and training timelines. Some firms front-load exams before the trainee contract to protect billable time. Others blend study with work to allow more flexibility. There's no one-size-fits-all – but clarity from the start means smoother delivery, better outcomes and fewer surprises.

10

Aligning Stakeholders Across the Firm

Setting up an SQE programme requires cross-functional alignment across HR and recruitment, training managers, supervisors and partners. Without shared expectations, even well-planned programmes can stall.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON:

- Create an internal communications plan, ensuring everyone understands the programme structure, timelines and what support trainees will need and receive. When teams are aligned, it's easier to embed the programme into your culture and ensure a consistent experience for trainees.

These challenges are real – but they're all manageable with the right support. The firms making progress are the ones asking the right questions early. [Click here](#) for a practical checklist to help you shape a strategy that works.

Getting Leadership Buy-In For SQE Investment



Securing senior leadership support is essential to move forward with SQE adoption. Here's how to make a clear, business-focused case:

- **Highlight the risk of standing still:** The LPC window is closing, and waiting carries real commercial and talent risks.
- **Connect your SQE strategy to firm priorities:** Link it directly to growth, talent retention and long-term competitiveness.
- **Demonstrate ROI:** Show how an SQE strategy can reduce recruitment costs, improve engagement and build a stronger talent pipeline.
- **Use real examples:** Share case studies from firms already seeing results.
- **Start small, scale up:** Propose a pilot SQE programme to test and refine your approach.

ACTION:

Firms securing leadership buy-in are already ahead. BARBRI offers tailored business case templates and presentations – get in touch to access yours.

GDL No Longer Required



The GDL is no longer a requirement under the SQE. However, non-law graduates still need to cover the essential legal principles it once provided. That's where BARBRI's Foundations in Law course comes in – a more accessible, lower-cost way to build the legal knowledge needed to succeed in SQE1.

- No extra qualification stage required
- Six-week online course, available on demand
- Far more cost-effective than the traditional GDL
- Covers legal research, legal jargon and the common law system in England and Wales
- Ensures non-law candidates are SQE-ready

When selecting an SQE provider, check how they support non-law graduates in building this foundation, without delaying progression.



How QWE Works in Practice

Under the SQE, candidates need to complete two years' Qualifying Work Experience (QWE), which can be gained flexibly across up to four organisations, including law firms, in-house teams, charities and legal clinics.

What counts as QWE?

Any work involving real legal services, such as:

- ✓ Drafting legal documents or contracts
- ✓ Legal research and case support
- ✓ Client interaction or attending meetings
- ✓ Supporting case management or negotiations

Who can sign it off?

QWE must be confirmed (not assessed) by either:

- ✓ A solicitor of England and Wales, or
- ✓ A Compliance Officer for Legal Practice (COLP) – the individual responsible for compliance at your organisation

Their role is simply to verify the experience, not to assess performance.

QWE offers far more **flexibility** than the traditional training contract, giving firms the ability to recognise paralegal experience, broaden entry routes and shape qualification pathways around real business needs.



Meet the SQE Trailblazers

How Leading SME Law Firms Are
Building Future-Proof Talent Pipelines

+ **Challenge:** Multiple qualification pathways were creating inconsistency and complexity across Moore Barlow's early careers journey.

+ **Solution:** The firm committed to transitioning fully to the SQE from 2026, aligning all trainee solicitors on a single, structured pathway – including front-loaded exams and integrated soft skills development.

+ **Impact:** A consistent trainee experience and stronger alignment between learning, development, and business needs.

+ **How BARBRI helped:** We worked closely with Moore Barlow to design a unified SQE pathway, providing personal coaching and wellbeing support tailored to the firm's trainee cohort.

“At Moore Barlow we'll be transitioning to the SQE with effect from 2026 and have a number of future trainees already studying with BARBRI. We felt it was important to reach a point where all of our trainee solicitors were on the same pathway.”

• DEBBIE MOORS, EMERGING TALENT MANAGER, MOORE BARLOW



Brabners

- + Challenge:** Brabners wanted to attract and retain a more diverse pipeline of early talent, while embedding wellbeing and career progression into its programme.
- + Solution:** The firm introduced a flexible SQE structure with dedicated wellbeing initiatives, individual coaching and regular check-ins to support trainee development.
- + Impact:** A scalable, inclusive talent strategy with increased engagement and alignment to the firm's values.
- + How BARBRI helped:** We introduced a trainee-first SQE programme with a built-in wellbeing plan, regular progress meetings and transparent reporting to support Brabners' diversity and inclusion goals.

“Learning should be accessible to all. We seek education providers that provide platforms to suit learning needs. Learning should now use technology and be provided in a variety of formats to suit today's law student. It should also incorporate human coaches who provide nurturing support and identify strengths and areas for improvement. A good provider ensures that the learner is well. Legal education is challenging – and in an evolving, fast-paced, competitive environment, ensuring that the learner's wellbeing is being reviewed, monitored and cared for is our priority.”

● LYNETTE SMITH,
HEAD OF LEARNING, BRABNERS



Vinson & Elkins

- + Challenge:** Vinson & Elkins wanted to streamline its training model while strengthening core skills development for first-year trainees.
- + Solution:** The firm partnered with BARBRI to develop the Prep for Practice programme, providing essential legal and commercial skills before trainees began their contracts.
- + Impact:** A sharper focus on foundational skills, supervision, and cultural alignment across the training pathway.
- + How BARBRI helped:** We co-developed a bespoke pre-contract skills programme, aligning content with the firm's training priorities and providing tailored coaching and supervision support.

“The transition to the SQE has allowed Vinson & Elkins to re-evaluate and improve our training programme. We have focused on defining the desired skills for first-year trainees, leading to the development of the work-ready skills programme in partnership with BARBRI to address fundamental professional skills before starting the training contract. Additionally, we have reassessed trainee support and supervision in line with the SRA cultural review, ensuring comprehensive support and refining our training by removing unnecessary elements.”

● AMAN KHAIRA, EARLY TALENT MANAGER,
VINSON & ELKINS

Practical Steps to Get SQE Ready

Here are 5 clear, actionable ways to help you structure an SQE approach that works for your business.

01

Clarify your starting point:

Map your current trainee pipeline and when SQE adoption will apply.

02

Set your programme budget and structure:

Decide how learning will fit around work (front-loaded, part-time or blended) and who pays for what.

03

Engage key decision-makers early:

Start the conversation with partners and leadership to align expectations and secure resources.

04

Choose the right provider:

Look for a training partner who offers flexibility, coaching, clear communication and detailed reporting for both trainees and employers.

05

Review:

Gather feedback from the cohort and other stakeholders and refine your approach for the next intake.

Talk to BARBRI about designing an SQE programme tailored to your firm's needs.

Talk to BARBRI Today

SECTION SEVEN

A Training Partner You Can Rely On

SME law firms across the UK choose BARBRI to help them build SQE programmes that reflect their culture, support their teams and drive long-term value. Our flexible, affordable approach helps firms develop future talent and build the skills they need to grow.

With BARBRI, you get more than a training provider, you get a partner that offers:

- + A strong track record of SQE success.
- + Flexible programmes tailored to your firm's needs.
- + Wellbeing and coaching support built in.
- + A tech-enabled Personal Study Plan (PSP) that adapts to each learner's progress.
- + Professional development options, including work-ready, professional skills training.
- + Structured L&D that builds future leaders, not just qualified solicitors.
- + Access to a live student progress dashboard to track performance at both individual and cohort level, helping you identify issues early and provide timely support.
- + Account management support from named individuals to ensure smooth enrolments, invoicing and feedback.

Meet Our Specialist Business Development Team



Victoria Fearne

Head of New Business and
Account Management



Jonathan Worrell

Business Development
Director



Henna Zafar

Sales Development
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Mercedes Benjamin

Client Services Manager



Imaan Razaq

Client Services Advisor

Talk to the BARBRI Team Today



Get In Touch

Request a Call Today

barbri®

Let's Build The Future, Together

Whether you're new to the SQE or refining your approach, BARBRI can help you create a programme that works – for your people, your firm and your long-term goals.

With flexible learning, professional development and practical support, we'll help you attract and retain talent, develop future leaders and stay ahead in a changing legal market.

Let's build the next
generation of legal
talent, together.

