

Five-star candidates

Jonathan Worrell presents five recommendations to help firms ensure the success of their SQE candidates



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Since 2021, a new generation of aspiring solicitors has been studying for the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE), which is now rapidly becoming the primary route to qualification in England and Wales. Headlines over the past four years have been plagued by challenging SQE stories, such as low pass rates, exam result mix-ups and stressed students. However, the good news is that, with the right support, SQE success is achievable. I have seen first-hand many examples of SQE candidates passing the exams in the highest quintile, moving through to qualification, thriving in their careers and adding great value to their firms.

So, how do we go about putting the right mechanisms in place to support SQE success? This article presents five key recommendations.

1 Align your SQE scheme with your firm's requirements

There are several ways to incorporate SQE into your early-careers strategy, with varying degrees of financial commitment. Popular approaches are as follows:

- **Front-loaded:** Ask your candidates to complete and/or pass SQE1 and SQE2 prior to joining your firm for qualifying work experience. This model is popular with busy law firms where aspiring lawyers need to focus 100% of their energy on work when they arrive through the doors.
- **Split:** Ask candidates to pass SQE1 prior to joining the firm, then support them through SQE2 while working with you. The benefit here is that SQE1 is the tougher (lower pass rate overall) and longer course to commit to. By passing SQE1, candidates demonstrate aptitude and require fewer study days going forwards. There is also a persuasive argument that offering some work experience prior to SQE2 will support exam success.
- **Working:** In this programme, the candidate joins the firm and studies alongside their work commitments. This is also the approach for the level 7 apprenticeship scheme, which has really taken off over the past 12 months (although, at the time of writing, there remains uncertainty over its future funding). You might require the individual to work with you for a

year as a paralegal before you invest in their SQE journey, to ensure they are committed and are an appropriate fit for your firm.

In all three of the above scenarios, you may or may not contribute towards cost of study. Some firms finance the whole SQE training package, some a contribution (for example, you might pay for the SQE courses but not the exams), while others require the student to pay.

Whatever your approach, make sure your policies are crystal clear, and communicate them to candidates and internally within the firm. Ensure you cover potential outcomes, such as failing an exam or deferring due to illness or life challenges. Also consider the needs and expectations concerning newly qualified roles, particularly for paralegals you may be supporting to qualify.

Finally, identify an experienced SQE training provider that understands your needs and requirements, who will work alongside you to monitor student progress and deliver results.

2 Ring-fence study leave

If you are asking candidates to study for the SQE alongside work, you will need a robust study-leave policy, which you should work through with your training provider (depending on length



of course and timings of exams). I have seen working students offered everything from five days total per SQE level to one day per week of study leave. Exam days are required in addition to this (two for SQE1 and five for SQE2, not necessarily together). If you are on the lighter end of the spectrum, candidates will need to understand that they may have to sacrifice some evenings and weekends to fully cover the course content.

One of the biggest challenges is that work often takes priority over studying. Ring-fencing study time is therefore vital to support SQE success, otherwise you risk students deferring their exams indefinitely due to insufficient preparation. It is important to map out when the candidates will be taking exams so that they are in a seat or practice area that will offer the flexibility required. Set out a clear policy from day one to ensure all candidates, supervisors and the firm understand and support the study-leave requirements.

3 Provide mental health and wellbeing support

From the style (SQE1 exams are five hours per day) and booking of exams (not always straightforward) to the stories in the media, SQE has high potential to cause stress, and candidates may feel understandably anxious. As a result of this pressure, it is important we put measures in place to support their wellbeing. As a training provider, I often

Reflections from a law firm

At Moore Barlow we'll be transitioning to the SQE in 2026 and have several future trainees already studying with BARBRI. We felt it was important to reach a point where all our trainee solicitors were on the same pathway for two key reasons. First, for our future trainees, it ensures they all have the same experience and support for what can be a challenging and stressful stage of their studies. Second, for the firm, it means that we have more flexibility to tailor our training programme to fit the needs of the business.

When making the decision to move to SQE, we decided to keep the fundamentals of our existing training contract the same: four six-month seat rotations and a front-loaded approach. However, we took the opportunity to introduce an additional soft skills training programme for our trainees, review our preferred training provider, increase our funding package and clarify our position on resits.

While the SQE has provided an opportunity to refresh our training programme, we know that it isn't going to come without its challenges. We are learning that Moore Barlow, like all law firms, needs to be alive to the potential impact of future trainees failing any part of the SQE. Some firms have taken the position of rescinding offers following one exam failure; others, like us, allow one resit. Regardless of which approach a firm adopts, any exam failure is going to require firms to be more flexible with their intakes, whether that be by moving trainees to different intakes or perhaps over-offering based on the expectation that a percentage of trainees will fail.

The primary goal for us is that all our future trainees pass the SQE at the first attempt. The key to achieving that is communication. Regular contact with our future trainees and BARBRI has been vital to ensure that they feel supported and that any issues are identified and resolved quickly.

– Debbie Moors, emerging talent manager at Moore Barlow

talk to law firm clients about this subject – it is high on their priority list. Even the most capable and confident students can feel overwhelmed.

Have an open-door policy for discussions on stress management. Many students feel stressed, so normalise the conversation around it. Guide candidates to stay focused on the studies directly in front of them and not to get too distracted by SQE horror stories on social media or chat forums.

Experience shows that dedicated students who are well supported by their firm and a training partner have a greater chance of success. Remind them that question practice and exam technique are key, so completing as many questions and mocks as possible is a priority.

Finally, if you have previous SQE candidates who have passed, ask them to act as mentors or coaches to give the next cohort reassurance and motivation on their journey.

4 Implement regular check-ins

To ensure SQE students stay on track, meet with your candidates regularly (we hear from our clients that monthly sessions work well) and ask them to feed back on how they are progressing through their course. Get them to highlight what is going well and anything they are struggling with.

Work with your training provider to understand students' attendance and receive progress reports and mock exams. That way you will pick up on issues early and can introduce solutions where necessary. If a candidate needs to defer an exam – perhaps for personal reasons, illness or lack of time to prepare – ensure you pick up on this early to avoid expensive cancellation fees.

5 Provide training for supervisors

For SQE students to be successful, they need supervisors and managers who understand how the SQE works and what the pressures and pinch points are. For lawyers that qualified via the legal practice course, their experience will have been very different.

Work with your training provider to offer supervisors an overview of the SQE programme and insight into the journey of your early talent. Sometimes there is a misconception that candidates simply need to sit a few multiple-choice exams. The reality is quite different, and having managers in place who are well informed, open and mindful of the pressures will make all the difference.