

Student Out-Comes Report

Five Years of the SQE: Where Are We Now?

This report summarises findings from Legal Cheek's SQE Outcomes Survey, conducted in partnership with BARBRI in December 2025. It explores who is taking the SQE, how candidates prepare and fund their training, how well they feel the SQE prepares them for the exams versus real-life practice, their progress through Qualifying Work Experience (QWE), and early-career outcomes (including role satisfaction, pay fairness, confidence in key skills, and perceived progression opportunities).



Executive Summary

Five years into the SQE era, this survey of 504 respondents provides a snapshot of how the system is functioning in practice. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number (so totals may not always sum to 100%).

QWE is a Bottleneck To Qualification. Around three in five respondents said they passed both at the first attempt (59%); however, one in five passed only one of the two exams (20%), and a further one in five did not pass either assessment first time (20%).

Early career sentiment is broadly positive. Around two thirds were satisfied with their current role (67%), though only just over half (54%) agreed they were paid fairly for the role they were in.

Pass Rates Are a Mixed Bag. Around three in five respondents said they passed both at the first attempt (59%); however, one in five passed only one of the two exams (20%), and a further one in five did not pass either assessment first time (20%).

Further skills development is required. Skills confidence was strongest in resilience and client communication, while weaker areas included drafting, negotiation and using legal tech, reinforcing the importance of real-world qualifying work experience and supervision in developing day-one practice capability.

Funding remains a major pressure for SQE students. Around two in five self-funded their preparation (39%), one in five relied on student loans (19%), and a small percentage relied on scholarships (2%). Meanwhile, 34% of respondents' preparation courses were sponsored by their employers.

The SQE appears to be breaking social-mobility barriers to the legal profession. Nearly half of respondents were educated at non-selective state schools (44%), compared with just 11% from independent schools, and two in five identified as first-generation university students (40%), suggesting the route is widening access beyond traditional pipelines.

Practice readiness is significantly shaped by QWE. While exam preparation is largely online or classroom-based, 24 months' qualifying work experience (QWE) is a prerequisite to qualification, recognising that practical legal skills and professional judgement are developed through real-world work rather than SQE learning alone.

Greater representation of disabled and neurodivergent talent within the SQE cohort. More than one in five respondents identified as disabled and/or neurodivergent, including 11% who considered themselves disabled under the Equality Act 2010 and 13% who identified as neurodivergent, reinforcing the importance of inclusive assessment, training and early-career support.

Who is taking the SQE?

Most respondents came to the SQE via conventional academic routes. Around two thirds entered as law graduates (68%), with non-law graduates forming the next largest group (22%). Smaller numbers entered via apprenticeships (3%), as overseas-qualified lawyers (2%), or through other routes (4%), including LPC graduates and career changers.

The survey captured a range of respondent background characteristics. In terms of gender identity, **67%** of respondents identified as female and **26%** as male, with the remainder identifying in another way or preferring not to disclose their gender.

With regard to ethnicity, **45%** of respondents identified as White. A further **24%** identified as Asian or Asian British, **10%** as Mixed, and **9%** as Black, African, Caribbean or Black British. Smaller proportions identified as belonging to another ethnic group (**3%**), while **9%** preferred not to say.

Several indicators of social mobility were also explored. In relation to secondary education, **44%** of respondents reported attending a UK state non-selective school, while **11%** attended a UK state selective (grammar) school and a further **11%** attended a UK independent or fee-paying school. Just over one fifth (**22%**) were educated mainly outside the UK, and **10%** preferred not to disclose this information. In addition, **40%** of respondents identified as first-generation university students, having grown up in households where neither parent nor guardian had attended university.

Respondents were also asked about disability and neurodivergence, with the options not being mutually exclusive. Overall, **11%** considered themselves disabled under the Equality Act 2010 and **13%** considered themselves neurodivergent. The majority (**64%**) selected neither option, while **16%** preferred not to say.

In relation to language background and international status, **59%** of respondents studied in the UK with English as their first language. A further **14%** studied in the UK with English not being their first language, while **16%** were international students who did not study in the UK prior to completing their SQE.

Finally, caring responsibilities were explored. Eight per cent of respondents reported being a primary carer for a child or children under the age of 18, while **81%** reported that they did not have such responsibilities. The remaining **11%** preferred not to disclose this.

Who is taking the SQE?

SQE preparation pathways were varied, but structured programmes dominated. The most common route was a full SQE preparation course (**37%**). Almost a quarter prepared through an LLM incorporating SQE prep (**24%**). Self-study also made up a significant share, with **18%** using paid resources and **15%** relying on free materials.

Those taking full-time courses made up **67%** of all respondents, with a full-time, in-person preparation course being the most common route (**46%** of all respondents) – the remaining full-time students were split amongst hybrid and online courses.

Part-time courses accounted for **33%** of respondents, with part-time, online preparation courses proving the second most popular course format (**25%** of all respondents). This is consistent with candidates balancing SQE study alongside work.



How are they funding the SQE?

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How Are Students Performing In The Exams

Among respondents who had attempted both assessments:

59% reported passing both SQE1 and SQE2 on the first attempt.

44% passed SQE1 only, while 6% passed SQE2 only.

35% failed both assessments at the first sitting.

Accordingly, 41% of candidates will have had to resit at least one exam in order to qualify, with retakes multiplying cost, delay and stress.

How manageable is work–life balance for students while studying?

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Work-life balance proved a significant challenge for many candidates during SQE preparation.

- + Just 10% described their work-life balance as extremely manageable.
- + Nearly half (48%) found it quite or moderately manageable.
- + A quarter found it quite challenging to manage, and 17% extremely challenging.

Overall, **58%** described their work-life balance as manageable to some degree, while **42%** found it challenging. This is likely to be felt most acutely by candidates studying part-time, working alongside preparation, or managing caring responsibilities.

How are students securing QWE?

Qualifying work experience appears to be a key pressure point in the SQE pathway. At the time the survey was carried out, **45%** of respondents had not started QWE or are exempt from QWE (for instance, having already qualified internationally), and only **17%** had completed it. The remainder had begun QWE but had not yet reached the full two years.

It should be noted that those who had not yet started or completed the full 24 months of QWE were at different stages of the qualification process, including candidates with training contracts secured but not yet commenced, as well as those who had not yet completed all SQE assessments. The figures therefore reflect a snapshot of progression rather than a definitive lack of access to QWE.

For respondents who had secured QWE, routes into roles were varied:

- + **41%** secured QWE via a training contract.
- + **18%** used 'other' routes, including current employment, apprenticeships, using recruiters and volunteer internships.
- + University resources or job fairs accounted for just over one in five (**11%** via university careers services; 10% via careers fairs).
- + Networks and online platforms also accounted for around one in five (**10%** via personal connections; 9% via LinkedIn).

Preparedness for SQE assessments and legal practice

The responses indicate a preparedness gap between exam readiness and practice readiness.

- ⊕ **Exam content:** 63% felt well or very well prepared for the SQE exams.
- ⊕ **Real-life legal practice:** less than half (**46%**) felt well or very well prepared for practice.

At first glance, this divergence suggests that the SQE assessments and associated preparation do not always translate directly into confidence in day-to-day legal work. However, this finding should be considered in light of respondents' progression through qualifying work experience. As outlined in the previous section, 'How are students securing QWE?', at the time of the survey, **45%** of respondents had not yet started QWE (or were exempt) and only **17%** had completed the full two years.

QWE is a core component of the SQE framework and is intended to support the development of practical, workplace-based skills that are difficult to acquire through classroom-based study alone. The lower levels of reported practice-readiness may therefore reflect the fact that a large proportion of respondents had not yet completed — or, in many cases, begun — this stage of the qualification process. As candidates progress through and complete their QWE, levels of confidence in real-world practice may evolve accordingly.

What roles are candidates securing post-SQE?

Respondents were at different stages of their early legal careers. **30%** were trainees, **12%** were qualified solicitors, and **31%** were in other legal roles (e.g. paralegal, legal operations, compliance).

A further **27%** reported that they were not currently working in legal practice at the time of the survey. This group included respondents still completing or resitting SQE assessments, those engaged in further study, future trainees whose training contracts have not yet commenced, those working in other sectors (such as banking, consulting, teaching and retail), as well as those who are currently unemployed.

Amongst those working in legal roles, City firms were the largest employers (**35%**), followed by regional/high street firms (**26%**) and in-house legal teams (**20%**). A smaller share work in alternative legal service providers, the public sector, or charities/not-for-profits (**15%**), and the remaining **4%** worked in 'other' organisations, including offshore and international firms and those who are self-employed. This reinforces that the 'SQE market' is diverse, not a single pipeline into City practice.



How do they feel about job satisfaction, pay and career progression?

Overall job satisfaction was relatively strong. Around two thirds agreed or strongly agreed they were satisfied with their current role (67%), while 11% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Pay fairness drew more mixed feeling. Just over half agreed or strongly agreed they were paid fairly (54%), but around one in five disagreed or strongly disagreed (19%). A sizeable neutral group (26%) suggests uncertainty, limited transparency, or a perceived mismatch between workload and reward.

Perceived progression opportunities were similarly mixed. 42% rated progression opportunities as good or excellent, but 28% rated them *limited or very limited*.



What skills are respondents developing, and how do they rate their strengths in these areas?

The survey also explored the key skills aspiring lawyers develop through both the SQE and qualifying work experience. Respondents reported the highest levels of confidence in interpersonal skills and resilience-related abilities:

59% rated themselves as advanced in emotional resilience and stress management.

32% rated themselves as advanced in client communication and relationship management.

Confidence was weaker in more technical and practice-based areas:

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22% rated themselves as advanced in practical drafting and negotiation, while 3% reported no proficiency and 23% reported only basic proficiency.

23% rated themselves as advanced in legal tech and AI tools, while 6% reported no proficiency and 25% only basic proficiency.

Other skill areas were as follows:

30% rated themselves as advanced in time management and billing, while 5% reported no proficiency.

24% rated themselves as advanced in commercial awareness and business understanding, while 1% reported no proficiency.

23% rated themselves as advanced in advocacy and oral presentation, while 5% reported no proficiency.



This pattern reinforces the central role of QWE quality and workplace exposure. Drafting, negotiation and technology-enabled practice are typically developed through supervised repetition and feedback, rather than classroom academic learning.

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Final thoughts...

Five years into the SQE, the survey paints a picture of a system that appears to prepare candidates well for the SQE assessments, but which is less effective at supporting students in accessing qualifying work experience and developing the practical skills needed to feel ready for day one of legal practice. Work-life balance and funding also emerge as common strains, adding further pressure for candidates navigating an already demanding assessment process.

At the same time, the findings suggest that the SQE is making progress towards its objective of widening access to the profession. The profile of respondents points to increased social mobility, with a substantial proportion coming from non-selective state schools and first-generation university

backgrounds, alongside greater representation of disabled and neurodivergent candidates within the qualification pipeline.

For employers such as law firms and SQE training providers, the message is fairly clear. Structured experience, regular feedback and hands-on exposure — particularly in drafting, negotiation and tech-enabled practice — continue to matter. So too do practical supports around wellbeing, accessibility, work-life balance and affordability for candidates balancing study with work and other commitments.