



30 January 2020

Ms Anna Bradley
Chair of the Board
Solicitors Regulation Authority
The Cube
199 Wharfside Street
Birmingham B1 1RN

Dear Ms Bradley,

We write on behalf of five associations representing teachers of law in institutions across the United Kingdom, to set out urgent concerns about the impact on young people of proposed changes to professional qualification for solicitors. Given our concerns, we urge the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) to reconsider their timetable, and to announce now that they will not seek to introduce the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) in September 2021.

Hundreds of thousands of seventeen year olds are currently starting to research their futures, looking through University websites, reviews and league tables, and talking to careers advisors, mentors, family members and friends. Prospectuses for all these courses go online in the spring, and Universities run open days and events in the summer before UCAS applications open in September 2020. Tens of thousands of these young people (as well as more mature students) will look at the combination of academic rigour, critical thinking, potential career opportunities and professional accreditation, and decide to undertake a law degree.

Unfortunately, it is currently impossible for these applicants to make an educated decision, in the light of any aspirations for a career as a solicitor, about the choices available to them. This is because of the current uncertainty about the introduction of the SQE, a 'single, national licensing examination that all prospective solicitors will take before qualifying.' The Solicitors Regulation Authority state on their website that '[f]rom autumn 2021, to qualify you will need to have a degree in any subject (or equivalent qualification or work experience), pass both stages of the SQE assessment – SQE 1 focuses on legal knowledge and SQE 2 on practical legal skills, have 2 years' qualifying work experience, pass our character and suitability requirements.' (all quotes from <https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/policy/sqe/solicitor-persona/>).

Quite aside from any other concerns, this creates serious problems for the current group of students thinking about applying to university in September 2020. The current rules for solicitor qualification require a law degree or postgraduate diploma in law. If the SQE goes ahead, the SRA will no longer require students to have undertaken a period of legal education at degree level.

However, the SQE does not yet have regulatory approval, and the SRA do not intend to apply for regulatory approval until the summer of 2020. We do not know exactly when this will be, or when a decision will be made. As it stands, major aspects of the examinations remain uncertain – including, for example, how and when skills will be assessed. The SRA do not plan to report back on their pilot of part of the examinations until the summer – perhaps not until immediately before they apply for approval.

Students are being told by the SRA that the SQE will be introduced and that their degree will not be a Qualifying Law Degree for the purposes of the SRA. However, there is little that university law schools can say to prospective students to clarify the position that will apply instead. Competition and Market Authority rules require – quite rightly – that education providers do not mislead students. The problem is that no one knows for definite whether the SQE will be introduced, or what it will look like, until after regulatory approval has been given. The plans could be rejected, they could be postponed, or the SRA could be forced to radically change them. No university is able at this stage to tell students how or if their university education will prepare them for the assessments, and none are able to fully answer questions from prospective students about their choices.

Young people under the age of eighteen are making potentially life changing decisions with only fragmentary information available, on a complex issue on which even universities cannot effectively advise them (and of which most school or college careers advisers are unaware). We therefore urge the SRA to announce a delay now, to ensure that young people making these vital decisions have the information available to make their choice.

Yours sincerely,

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