

‘My vision for the new solicitor super-exam’

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Challenging times can yield the greatest career lessons. Sarah Hutchinson, international managing director at global legal education provider BARBRI, learned this as a solicitor over 20 years ago when she returned to her home city of Manchester to work as a real estate lawyer at Laytons — just as a property recession struck. “It was a really challenging time, and it taught me the value of flexibility and transferability of skills. There simply wasn’t enough real estate work to do to make my billable hours target so I turned to other practice areas. I did family, divorce, mergers & acquisitions, litigation. While it was stressful at the time, it was a fantastic experience because of what I learned.”

With a view to the current cohort of students and graduates, Hutchinson says “there’s an interesting parallel between those days and now. Until recently, there was pressure on young lawyers towards early specialisation and creating a niche, but potentially the opposite may be required for the next generation of legal professionals. I think future lawyers will be required to have flexible skills, and to demonstrate competence across broader practice areas. It will be very important that they have the right mindset and can show they are, with the right training and development, able to turn their hand to different types of work. Transferability of skills will be very important.”

After working as a solicitor in private practice, Hutchinson moved to the legal education sector, spending many years at The University of Law, where she was responsible for the trainee, post-qualification and international programmes. She is now international managing director at BARBRI, which prepares law graduates and lawyers to prepare for the US bar exam and, in the UK, the Qualified Lawyers Transfer Scheme (QLTS).

BARBRI is developing a preparation course for the forthcoming Solicitors Qualifying Exam (SQE), which will begin to replace the Legal Practice Course (LPC) from 2021. Both the LPC and the GDL (Graduate Diploma in Law) for non-law graduates are expected to have been abolished by 2022. Under current proposals, the solicitor qualification process will consist of a degree, the SQE and at least 24 months of legal work experience. There will be two parts to the exam: SQE1 will cover legal knowledge and SQE2 will assess practical skills such as drafting, advocacy or client interviewing.

The SQE has attracted some controversy — critics point to the absence of an elective option, where students choose to focus on a particular area of practice. Perceived advantages of the SQE include that it is cheaper and more flexible, therefore accessible to a wider pool of applicants. Hutchinson is confident that BARBRI can run an SQE course for considerably less than the £12,000-£17,000 cost of an LPC. “BARBRI will be launching its first programme in January 2021. We are entering the market because the SQE mirrors the US bar exams and QLTS exams. It has a similar structure, similar content and identical multiple-choice and skills testing, and BARBRI has over 50 years’ experience in these exams. BARBRI prepares 28,000 graduates to sit the US bar exams each year and it has the best success rates in the exam. Our objective is to bring that value and knowhow to the UK and, because we have already built the learning technology, we can scale it up at a reasonable cost.”

So, what form will the BARBRI-SQE Prep take? “We will deliver a blended-learning course, with online lectures, face-to-face workshops, significant exam practice, and one-to-one study mentors. Its strength is the flexibility it affords to people working full or part-time, and it provides a cheaper, quicker, more flexible route to qualification. There are also, I think, benefits in terms of quality. One of the features of the LPC is that some law firms tailor the LPC to their own requirements because the firms have specific specialist practice areas. That may be good for the firm although ultimately limits the opportunities for their trainees. Under the new system, however, candidates will be tested on a broader range of subjects and the test of practical skills will be set at a higher level — qualification level rather than entry-level trainee competence. This means that if you are, for example, a paralegal in Manchester, already working at the coalface, talking to clients, dealing with transactions and so forth then your skillset will give you a competitive advantage.”