

# Project Report 1: Experiences of Alternative Pathways into the Solicitors Profession - Emerging Findings

May 2025

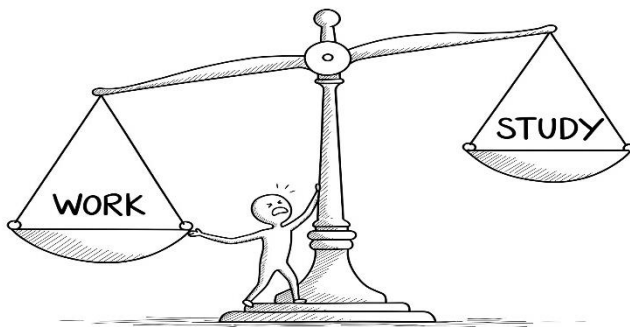
## Introduction

This project report has been created to share some of the key themes that are beginning to emerge from our analysis of the interviews conducted solicitor apprentices.

The study aimed to find out how apprentice solicitors understand and experience their pathway. Data collection occurred between February 2024 and April 2025, and comprised an initial interview, followed by a minimum of 6 months of individual diary entries, followed by a second interview to reflect on the diary entries; finally, a focus group with participants shared and reflected upon preliminary findings. These findings are organised by 5 key themes we identified, supported by anonymised quotes from participants in the study and illustrations to help bring these themes to life. Our full analysis is still underway, and these are preliminary insights.

We hope this report provides a useful overview of some of the central experiences shared by our participants, who are at various stages of progression in their solicitor apprenticeship and working in law firms in London and the South East, the North West, Yorkshire, and the North East.

## Theme 1: Balancing Work and Study Challenges



**What We Heard:** This was a universal theme highlighted across interviews. Participants consistently spoke about the difficulties of managing a demanding job alongside rigorous academic study.

### Voices from the study: Key Quotes:

"I think I would say that one of the most difficult things I struggle with is balancing work and study..."

"But Monday is just simply not enough, you can't just, you know, do everything on a Monday and forget about it, you do have to kind of work throughout the week just to get everything done."

"Extremely. I would say even until now that's something which I do tend to struggle with..."

"...it doesn't happen very often, but just with certain projects you have absolute deadlines and again there's not enough hours in the day to do all the tasks, so I had to show that I was willing to finish the tasks. To get it done for the Monday I had to do it at the weekend."

**Reflecting on This Theme:** The experiences shared above highlight the significant commitment and time management skills required when pursuing alternative pathways that combine work and study. Individuals may have access to varying levels of support and resources to navigate these demanding schedules. Understanding these challenges can inform how these pathways can be better structured and supported to ensure equitable access and success for all.

### Theme 2: Value of Practical Experience



**What We Heard:** A core motivation and a key benefit of the apprenticeship route. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of hands-on learning in a real-world setting.

### Voices from the study: Key Quotes:

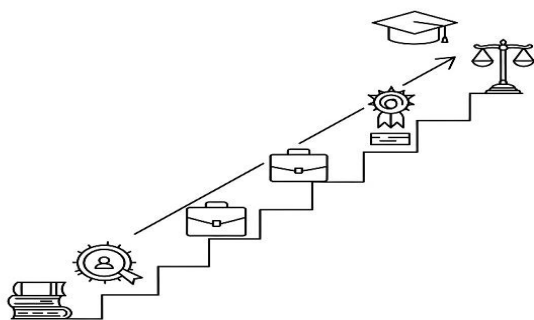
"And I think I knew I worked better in that way, kind of applying what I was learning at uni directly into practice, so that it's really good for retaining information when you are using it every day..."

"...the actual first-hand experience, on the job learning as an apprentice. You just can't get that in a classroom, I don't think, which is extremely helpful."

"...by the time I qualify ... based on experience, I will be a very highly qualified solicitor compared to an NQ..."

**Reflecting on This Theme:** The strong emphasis placed on the value of practical experience underscores a key advantage of alternative pathways like apprenticeships. This hands-on learning not only aids in knowledge retention but also builds crucial skills and confidence for future careers as solicitors. This practical focus can be particularly beneficial for individuals who learn best through doing and may provide a more direct route to competence and professional success.

### Theme 3: Career Progression and Development



**What We Heard:** Participants demonstrate a strong drive for professional growth and see the apprenticeship as a pathway to career advancement.

#### Voices from the study: Key Quotes:

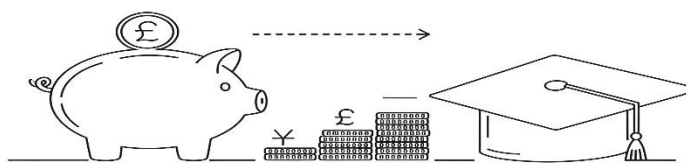
"So I thought it was a really great opportunity to, you know, if I was to get the apprenticeship I would have it [training contract] included within that rather than having to look for one, you know, there's always the risk, cos it's so competitive."

"Like career progression is really important to me ... I know a lot of people that have worked in firms for years and then it gets to training contract applications and they don't feel like they've been supported by the firm because they're just placed in the same, like, category as people that are applying externally."

**"I mean the experience you get is just brilliant and then you can create such a network with people that you're gonna be working with for years that you'll come across years later, and just the opportunities you get is brilliant."**

**Reflecting on This Theme:** Aspirations for career progression and a view of the apprenticeship as a valuable stepping stone highlight the importance of these alternative pathways in providing clear routes for professional development. The perceived support within firms and the opportunity to build valuable networks are significant factors contributing to this view. These pathways can offer a more structured and potentially less competitive route to career advancement compared to solely relying on securing a traditional training contract after graduation.

## **Theme 4: Financial Considerations**



**What We Heard:** Financial factors play a significant role in the decision to pursue an apprenticeship, often driven by a desire to avoid student debt and earn while learning.

### **Voices from the study: Key Quotes:**

**"Yeah, it was definitely something; obviously it's a positive that I don't have any kind of student debt, but I wouldn't really say it was a massive point for me."**

**"Obviously my mum had that experience with university which was slightly different, they were massively in favour of going into work and not doing the traditional route of university, you know, I think a big problem for them was the whole student loans and how difficult all of that is."**

**"I didn't want to go to uni, like I wasn't fussed about the uni life, you know, moving away from home; I'm really close to my family...Yeah, I would say that was a big part of it, and also another big part was the fact I didn't want so much debt, I wanted to just go out there"**

and work, earn money, I really wanted to; like I had a few goals set so I wanted to buy a house, which I wouldn't have been able to do had I gone to uni, yeah, so I managed to save my money for that."

**Reflecting on This Theme:** The financial advantages of alternative pathways, particularly the ability to earn while learning and avoid significant student debt, are clearly important considerations for many, removing a significant barrier to entry into the legal profession for individuals from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. These pathways can make a legal career more accessible to those who might not otherwise be able to afford the traditional university route.

## Theme 5: Emotional Impact of the SQE



**What We Heard:** The SQE exams are a major source of stress and anxiety, with significant emotional impact on participants at this stage of the apprenticeship.

### Voices from the study: Key Quotes:

"Oh it was just horrific, absolutely horrific; and I thought SQE1 was bad enough but SQE2 was something else."

"I would describe it as now it's just a cloud, a cloud that's been hanging over my head for almost two years and I'll just be glad to just have it done and dusted."

"I'm looking into having therapy for it, just to help me manage and cope with the stress of it...Also I think my university have just added some resources to the sort of hub which is like SQE wellbeing support, because I think every student doing the SQE genuinely goes through a lot of stress and anxiety associated with that."

**Reflecting on This Theme:** The significant emotional impact of the SQE exams is a critical finding. These experiences highlight the intense pressure and anxiety associated with these assessments. It's important to consider how this emotional burden might disproportionately affect individuals with less support or resources. Understanding these challenges can inform the development of better support mechanisms and resources to ensure that the SQE does not create new barriers to entry or negatively impact the wellbeing of those pursuing alternative pathways.

## Conclusion

We have presented some of the key themes that are emerging from our conversations with solicitor apprentices about their experiences on alternative pathways into the solicitors' profession. These themes – including the challenges of balancing work and study, the perceived value of practical experience, aspirations for career progression, the significant role of financial considerations, and the emotional impact of the SQE – represent some of the central threads in the narratives shared.

These findings are still preliminary, and our analysis is ongoing. Your feedback on the themes presented in this report is incredibly important to us. Please feel free to share any thoughts or questions you may have about these emerging findings by contacting us at [caroline.barrett@york.ac.uk](mailto:caroline.barrett@york.ac.uk). Your insights will be invaluable as we move towards the next stages of our research and the development of our final project report.

The longer-term experiences of solicitor apprentices are vital to understanding the impact of alternative pathways on individuals' career journeys and outcomes, especially in the context of the withdrawal of funding for level 7 apprenticeships. If this is relevant to you and you are happy to be contacted in the future about any new projects exploring this, please email me at [caroline.barrett@york.ac.uk](mailto:caroline.barrett@york.ac.uk) to register your interest.

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