The Essential Guide to Educational Requirements for UK Lawyers

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For those aspiring to a career in law, it's crucial to grasp the education required to be a lawyer. The term 'lawyer' in the UK encompasses solicitors, barristers (advocates in Scotland), and chartered legal executives. Moreover, the UK's three main jurisdictions – England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland – offer similar yet distinct paths to qualification. This article will delve into these different routes and guide you on how to become a lawyer in the UK.

The traditional path to becoming a solicitor or barrister is the degree route, but it's not the only one. This is followed by vocational training and professional examination or assessment. It is, therefore, important to choose subjects at school to support your application for university admission. There are also alternative pathways to lawyer qualification, which we will look at later.

How long does it take to become a lawyer?

The education required to become a lawyer in the UK will take 5 – 6 years.

Can you become a lawyer without law degree?

Yes. There are two main routes available: Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL) or Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE): After completing a degree in any subject, you can take the GDL or SQE to gain the legal knowledge needed to practice. The GDL is for aspiring barristers, while the SQE is the new route for solicitors. CILEx Lawyer Apprenticeship: This option combines work and study through an apprenticeship, allowing you to qualify as a CILEx lawyer. If you already have a degree, you can start at a more advanced level.

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Education Required to be a Lawyer: Starting your Undergraduate Degree

The Bachelor of Laws (LLB) degree is the most popular route to qualification. Sharpen your focus early if you want to follow the degree route to qualification. If you're set on this path, it's essential to start shaping your academic profile early. A strong set of GCSEs (SCQF Level 5 in Scotland) in academic subjects will lay a solid foundation for your legal education.

Building on that, entry to an LLB course requires passing A-Level (Highers, in Scotland). Universities look for passes, usually with a combination of three or more A* or A grades, in academic subjects. Examples are English Language and Literature, Mathematics, History or Modern Studies. A foreign language or science would be a good addition. Whilst optional, an A Level in Law is not an essential requirement. Getting into law school in the UK involves achieving strong A-level results in academic subjects.

If you wish to practise as a solicitor or barrister, choose a qualifying LLB course. A qualifying LLB course provides the core subjects the professional regulatory bodies require. There are options for becoming a lawyer if you have another degree. However, the LLB route is the most direct first step to becoming a lawyer.

Postgraduate Training: The Next Steps

Graduating with an LLB degree is the first step on the academic route to qualification as a lawyer. The following steps are passing professional exams and assessments before formally entering the solicitor profession. The path to qualification is similar in England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. However, there are differences in terminology and structure.

The route to solicitor qualification in England and Wales

The Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) introduced a new route to qualification as a solicitor, called the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE). The SQE came into effect in the Autumn of 2021. However, there is a transitional period until 2032 for those already on the road to solicitor qualification. Under the previous system, aspiring solicitors had to complete a Legal Practice Course (LPC). Where they had a degree other than an LLB degree, they had to complete the Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL). We will focus on the SQE route to qualification.

Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE)

The SQE is the post-LLB stage of education required to become a lawyer in England and Wales. Its purpose is to ensure uniformity of standards. The SQE replaces both the GDL and LPC. It is a series of exams taken in two stages.

SQE1 tests your functioning knowledge of the law, comprised of 180 multiple-choice questions. Before moving on to SQE2, you must pass SQE1.

SQE2 aims to test practical legal skills. It is assessment-based and consists of four oral skills assessments and twelve written assessments. In addition, ethics and professional conduct are assessed throughout.

You should take SQE1 before commencing two years of qualifying work experience (QWE) and SQE2 after completing the QWE.

Work Experience and Practical Training in England and Wales

Two years of qualifying work experience is part of the education required to become a lawyer. You must develop your competencies and skills during these two years. Your QWE can occur within law firms, legal clinics in academic institutions, law centres and other appropriate organisations.

The final stage of how to become a solicitor in England and Wales is to pass the SRA's character and suitability requirements. To do this, you cannot have a criminal record, have no record of dishonesty and no serious credit or money issues.

The route to solicitor qualification in Scotland

In Scotland, you must complete a Diploma in Professional Legal Practice after completing your LLB degree. This is part of the Law Society of Scotland's Professional Education and Training (PEAT) programme. This is the next stage in the education required to become a lawyer in Scotland. It is a one-year, university-delivered course focusing on the practicalities of the law. The Diploma also includes ethics, business and practice awareness and finance modules. Prospective lawyers need to understand that a law firm is a business!

Work Experience and Practical Training in Scotland

A Traineeship (PEAT 2) within a law firm follows on from the Diploma (PEAT 1). During the Traineeship, Trainees will work alongside solicitors and other staff in law firms to gain experience. They will be mentored by a solicitor and conduct legal work under supervision. This essential practical training is critical to the education required to become a practising lawyer.

Trainees must also undertake 40 hours of Continuous Professional Development (TCPD) delivered by an authorised provider, including a four-hour mandatory ethics course.

You can apply to the Law Society of Scotland for admission as a solicitor as early as three months into your traineeship. A Standard Disclosure Scotland Report must accompany this. Once admitted, you must apply for a restricted Practising Certificate. You can only apply for a full Practising Certificate once your training contract has been discharged.

The route to solicitor qualification in Northern Ireland

The Law Society of Northern Ireland is the governing body of solicitors in the province. After completing the LLB degree, you must complete a Postgraduate Diploma in Professional Legal Studies. The Institute of Professional Legal Studies (IPLS), part of Queen's University Belfast, manages this qualification. You must sit for an entrance exam before you can take your place.

You will also need a two-year apprenticeship contract with a law firm in Northern Ireland. Then, you must register for the apprenticeship contract and confirm completion of the entrance examination with the Law Society of Northern Ireland.

Work Experience and Practical Training in Northern Ireland

All Northern Ireland Trainees commence their training on the same date. You will complete a combined in-office and full-time course process commencing each September.

The framework for part of your lawyer education process is:

- **September – December:** In-office Trainee;
- **January – December:** Studies at IPLS (but spending Easter, Summer and Christmas in-office);
- **January – September:** In-office Trainee.

You must also complete four Law Society of Northern Ireland modules. These are:

- **Professional Conduct Course;**
- **Solicitors Accounts Course;**
- **Regulatory Obligations;**
- **Client Complaints.**

To be eligible to become a solicitor in Northern Ireland, you must successfully pass your Postgraduate Diploma in Professional Legal Studies. You must also successfully pass all Law Society Modules and provide evidence of completion of the two-year indenture. Finally, you must also satisfy the society of your suitability for admission. This involves

producing evidence of your character. You must not be convicted of a criminal offence, an undischarged bankrupt or otherwise fail to satisfy the committee of your fitness to be a solicitor.

The route to becoming a barrister in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

There are three stages of becoming a barrister in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland: academic training, vocational, and work-based.

Stage 1: The academic training stage – studying for and achieving an LLB Degree.

Stage 2: The vocational stage – usually known as the Bar course (formerly the Bar Professional Training Course (BPTC)).

Stage 3: The work-based stage – undertaking a pupillage with a barrister chambers. This is a form of on-the-job training.

There is also an option to combine stages 1 and 2 as part of an integrated course before undertaking a pupillage. The Bar Standards Board (BSB) regulates barristers in England and Wales.

Once completed, you must find a set of chambers to practice (a "tenancy").

The route to becoming an advocate in Scotland

An advocate is the Scottish equivalent of a barrister in England and Wales. Becoming an advocate is similar to becoming a barrister but with certain nuances.

You must gain a Scottish LLB Honours Degree. The degree should include Civil (Roman) Law and International Private Law courses. If it doesn't, you must take these before you are called to the bar.

You will then complete the Diploma in Professional Legal Practice and the two-year Traineeship.

You must then inform the Clerk of the Faculty of Advocates of your intention to become an advocate, petition the Court, and supply the necessary disclosure information and references.

Before being admitted to the Faculty of Advocates, you must undergo a period of devilling, the Scottish equivalent of pupillage.

Specialisations and Continuing Education

After completing the education required to become a lawyer and qualify as a solicitor, you must continue professional development throughout your career.

Once qualified, you can choose to specialise in your preferred practice area.

Whilst most high street lawyers provide a general range of services, the solicitors will tend towards their own fields of law within these practices. Large, national and international firms have lawyers who are highly specialised in specific areas of law.

Alternative Routes into Law

The majority of lawyers follow the traditional degree route to becoming a lawyer. However, there are other options.

One of England and Wales's most popular routes to qualification as a solicitor is through the Chartered Institute of Legal Executives (CILEX). This route allows students to earn whilst they learn.

The CILEx route to becoming a solicitor

The CILEx Professional Qualification route was launched in 2021. There are three stages:

- CPQ Foundation allows students to become a CILEx Paralegal;
- CPQ Advanced, allowing students to become an Advanced Paralegal;
- CPQ Professional allows students to become CILEx Lawyers. CILEx lawyers tend to focus on a single area of law.

A CILEx lawyer must pass the SQE to become a solicitor. The time spent working as a Paralegal or CILEx lawyer counts towards the work experience element of the SQE.

Legal Apprenticeships in England and Wales

Since 2016, legal apprenticeships in England and Wales have been an optional route to qualification as a solicitor. A legal apprenticeship can take 5 to 6 years to complete. To qualify, the apprentice must pass the two-part SQE.

Non-degree solicitor qualification in Scotland

In Scotland, there is an alternative route to qualification as a solicitor without an LLB. A three-year pre-PEAT traineeship allows you to work in a law firm. You must study for and pass several Law Society of Scotland exams during that time. Following this, the usual route to becoming a solicitor is to complete the Diploma in Professional Legal Practice (PEAT 1) and then a traineeship (PEAT 2).

However, there is also the possibility of completing a non-PEAT 1 Traineeship. This three-year traineeship is only available to someone granted an exemption by the Law Society of Scotland's Admissions Sub-committee.

Alternative solicitor qualification route in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, it is possible to qualify as a solicitor if you have a non-law degree. However, you would still need to follow the same route as someone with a law degree.

Conclusion

The education required to become a lawyer in the UK will take 5 – 6 years, irrespective of your chosen route. If you wish to become a lawyer, there are now options to enter this rewarding career despite not having a law degree. Note that the legal profession can be stressful, but the stress is manageable with the right strategies and attitude.

The LLB route may be the most straightforward. It allows for university study followed by post-graduate regulatory exams and assessment. This runs alongside work experience. However, if you don't wish to go to university, there are alternative routes to qualification as a lawyer. These involve working within the legal profession whilst studying for and passing various exams.

However, should you wish to become a barrister or advocate, the LLB route is the only option.

The good news for those passionate about becoming lawyers is that the degree route is no longer the only option. Before you embark on a legal career, thoroughly scope out the available routes to qualification. That done, select the one best suited to your circumstances.

Once you've completed the education required to be a lawyer, you can think about starting your own law firm.

Our guide has everything you need to make it happen. From essential considerations to practical tools, this guide will ensure you start your law firm on the right path. Get started today!

FAQs about the education required to become a lawyer

Can you become a lawyer without law school?

Yes, you can become a lawyer in the UK without a law degree. Two main routes are available:

Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL) or Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE): After completing a degree in any subject, you can take the GDL or SQE to gain the legal knowledge needed to practice. The GDL is for aspiring barristers, while the SQE is the new route for solicitors.

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How long does it take to become a lawyer?

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How do you start being a lawyer?

To become a lawyer in the UK, you can follow one of several pathways depending on your educational background:

With a Law Degree: If you study law at the undergraduate level (LLB), you can directly move on to vocational training—either the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) if you want to become a solicitor or the Bar Practice Course (BPC) for barristers.

Without a Law Degree: If your undergraduate degree is in another field, you can take a law conversion course, such as the Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL), followed by the SQE for solicitors or the BPC for barristers.

CILEx Route: Another alternative is to qualify through the Chartered Institute of Legal Executives (CILEx), which combines work and study, allowing you to become a legal executive and eventually a solicitor without needing a university degree.

Each path includes practical training and passing professional exams to qualify fully.

What are the requirements for a career in law?

A career in law typically requires a combination of education, training, and certain personal attributes. Here are the key requirements:

Educational Requirements:

Law Degree: Most aspiring lawyers start with a law degree (LLB). However, if your undergraduate degree is in another field, you can complete a conversion course like the Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL).

Vocational Training

Solicitors: After your degree or GDL, you need to pass the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) and complete two years of Qualifying Work Experience (QWE).

Barristers: You'll need to complete the Bar Practice Course (BPC) and a one-year pupillage (practical training under a practising barrister).

Alternative Routes

The Chartered Institute of Legal Executives (CILEx) offers a route combining work and study, allowing you to become a legal executive and eventually a solicitor without a degree.

Professional Qualifications:

After education and training, you'll need to pass the necessary professional exams (SQE for solicitors, Bar exams for barristers) and be admitted to the relevant legal body, such as the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) or Bar Standards Board (BSB).

Practical Experience:

Training Contract: For solicitors, this is part of the QWE, where you gain hands-on experience in a law firm.
Pupillage: For barristers, this is the final stage of training under a supervising barrister.

Skills and Attributes:

Analytical and Research Skills: Essential for understanding complex legal issues.
Communication Skills: Both written and oral skills are crucial for drafting documents and presenting cases.
Ethical Judgment: Lawyers must adhere to strict ethical standards.
Problem-Solving Skills: The ability to think critically and creatively is key to developing legal strategies.
Resilience: The legal profession can be demanding, requiring perseverance and a strong work ethic.

Continuous Professional Development (CPD):

Even after qualification, lawyers are required to engage in CPD to stay updated with legal developments.

What degree do you need to be a lawyer?

1. Law Degree (LLB):
The most direct route is to complete an undergraduate law degree (LLB), which covers the foundational legal knowledge required for a legal career.

2. Non-Law Degree:
If you have an undergraduate degree in a subject other than law, you can still become a lawyer by completing a conversion course like the Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL) or the more recent Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE). These courses provide the necessary legal foundation.

3. Alternative Routes:
Through CILEx (Chartered Institute of Legal Executives), you can become a legal executive and eventually qualify as a solicitor without holding a university degree. This path combines work experience with academic study.

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