I am a former Principal Teacher of Chemistry.

My over-arching concern about the SQA is that it is accountable to nobody. It refuses to respond to legitimate concerns raised by teachers. It seems more concerned with revenue-generation than with serving the needs of candidates. Here are some examples:

Standard Grade introduced practical work in Chemistry but it was to be assessed by teachers, not a visiting examiner. Pupils were allowed unlimited attempts to succeed, and then had to submit 'evidence' in the form of labelled diagrams and accounts of the procedures. I wrote repeatedly to the SQA pointing out that (a) allowing repeated attempts was not assessment but a time-consuming method of training and (b) drawing a correctly labelled diagram is only 'evidence' that the pupil can draw a correctly labelled diagram. It was clear from what little response I received that SQA officials did not understand the reality of the assessment or were too lazy to effect remedial change. I regret to say that one of these officials went on to become an HMI with Education Scotland.

In 2009 the SQA decided to impose a £55 penalty per late appeal against an exam result. The deadline was the earliest I'd experienced in 25 years as a Principal Teacher. Also it was no longer sufficient to say that the prelim had used questions from, eg, Highers 1989-1991 (ie past papers no longer printed for pupils to purchase). Each individual question's source had to be stated. I telephoned an official to complain and she said there was nothing unusual about the deadline and that 'validity' would be compromised if I did not identify the source of each question. I said "OK what if I claim to have written all the questions myself?" No answer. Again, clearly an official who was charged with managing procedures she did not understand. She would not take my call weeks later when I had the figures for late appeals. 2007 and 2008 roughly 900 late. 2009, the year with the 'nothing unusual about it' deadline....1400, each generating £55 for the SQA at the expense of school budgets. One Edinburgh school paid them £1000.

When a colleague asked the SQA if a Principal Assessor could visit her school to advise on internal assessment she was told the fee would be £500. She found out that the PA taught at a school in her region so made direct contact. The PA was happy to visit for modest travel expenses and refreshments. Revenue generation does seem to be a prime SQA priority.

When the proposals for Curriculum for Excellence were at an early stage, comments were invited by an SQA steering group. I strongly advised against internal assessment based on my experience of the above mentioned practicals and the equally fatuous Unit Assessments in Higher and Advanced Higher. I was told that my
concerns were 'disappointing'. National 4s went ahead with total internal assessment, which demoralised and stigmatised pupils, put the marking burden onto teachers while reducing massively SQA expenditure on invigilators and assessors. Subsequent events have proved my concerns to be justified.

A few years ago a group of Aberdeenshire teachers found over 100 errors in the Unit and Final assessments in the Humanities subjects. I e-mailed my support and learned that (a) Their concerns were ignored by the SQA who continued to publish the flawed questions in past-paper books. (b) Their petition to the Scottish Parliament to establish a watchdog body was rejected. (c) They took their complaint to an Ombudsman but the SQA exploited a loophole in the process to avoid being called to account.

Recent press reports have highlighted the poor quality of a Higher Mathematics Exam and a National 5 Computing Science paper. In each case the initial response of 'an SQA spokesman' was denial ('We've had positive feedback'). Dr Janet Brown appeared before a Scottish Parliament committee and was asked what had gone wrong with the Maths Higher. She evaded the question and delivered instead a series of platitudes about ongoing commitment to ever improving standards of assessment. The actual answer is in the correspondence columns of the Herald. SQA officials had repeatedly undermined the judgments of the Principal Assessor in Maths so that he and his highly experienced team of setters had resigned en masse.

Here is a comment made by a current teacher, published in the Herald on-line, about a colleague who had attended an SQA meeting on marking:

"She'd been at a meeting where someone from the SQA gave a room full of teachers and markers some scripts which they had to grade, saying which were passes and which fails. They got it all wrong, so they asked the SQA woman to explain the marking, and she became very flustered. She then said that maybe they were right, and she was wrong - the scripts weren't labelled so that she could be certain which were the passes. My colleague said that surely an assessment system that meant anything should mean that a room full of teachers and markers, and the person managing the qualification for the SQA, should just be able to mark the scripts and see which were the passes. This, though, was a disingenuous remark on her part. In fact the qualifications are now such an utter and complete dog's breakfast nobody skilled in the art could actually mark a Scottish examination paper. You have to sit and make sure that they've said one thing about item 1:13, and linked that to either item 2.31 OR item 6.62, but not part C of 6.62, unless they chose to study source A as well"

This quango cannot be allowed to continue in its current form.

John Samson