I am a classroom teacher of physics, working in a city state school, and involved in preparing students for qualifications ranging from N3 Environmental Sciences to Advanced Higher physics. I am afraid that my current experience of the SQA is almost entirely negative. I shall endeavour to outline some of the problems below.

Documentation is highly complex, repetitive and difficult to access - key information is buried amongst a great deal of repetitive and extraneous information, is found in different locations, is spread across different documents whose headings seem unrelated to their contents, and sometimes is located on different websites (whilst some material clearly does need to be on the SQA secure site, surely this should only be the absolute minimum necessary for formal summative assessments). Furthermore, documents are not clearly marked to show updates, and do not always articulate with each other (I can give examples of where two sets of documents, accessed on the same day from SQA, give mutually contradictory information). I have worked in several different countries, and have never before found it so hard to decipher what is required of me. Indeed, when I first moved to Scotland, I had nothing like this level of difficulty understanding the requirements of the qualifications system. There should be one definitive course document for each level of qualification (there is no reason each unit cannot be specified within such a document), with assessment materials available on the SQA secure website.

A great deal of workload has been shifted onto teachers. This is everything from us being required to wade through constant changes and updates, to a huge shift in the burden of assessment. Leaving aside the matter of over-assessment, the requirements on teachers to deliver, sometimes devise, frequently adapt, and often mark, aspects of course assessment have massively increased with the new qualifications. It is particularly galling when we get comments that say that SQA will not be able to deliver updates to things such as unit assessments, but do say that each school is expected to make changes/adapt mark schemes etc.

Quality control is currently poor. I have already mentioned times when documents have clearly not been checked against each other, but unit assessments are also poor, with mistakes that go uncorrected for significant portions of time, questions of extremely variable demand and quality within one paper, and little evidence that the papers have been trialled (for example, Advanced Higher unit assessments that regularly took students nearly 2 hours to complete).

The fact that students are currently massively over-assessed is one that I believe everyone is familiar with, so I won’t cover this again. It is to be hoped that recent reforms will begin to address this, though I can see no good reason why Higher and Advanced Higher students will continue to have such a poor experience for a further couple of years. In the sciences at the least (and, I believe, in almost all subjects)
there are no aspects of assessment that are not overtaken in the final exam. Forcing the students to continue to jump through unit assessment hoops "to ensure the validity of the course award" is simply a way of the SQA saving face. I challenge them to point to a single element of the physics course award at N5, Higher or Advanced Higher that is addressed in the unit assessments and not the final exam.

The burden of verification that SQA is placing on schools is also something that has been discussed at length. One aspect that has not received the attention it deserves is, I believe, the amount of time teachers are being asked to be out of the classroom to attend SQA training and to carry out verification. Even when the SQA does pay for cover for these (not often enough for mandatory training) there is not always specialist cover available. It would be interesting to see a breakdown of how much time verifiers are expected to take out from the classroom. Certainly, part of the reason I know I and many of my colleagues will not take on verification is the impact on our students.

Equally, the SQA frequently boasts of the number of Understanding Standards events it is offering. Whilst such courses are, indeed, welcome and necessary, I would point out that I am a reasonably well-educated and intelligent teacher with many years' experience, and who has been delivering these new qualifications for several years. If I, and every colleague in my department, is still having to attend these courses every year (at a rough count, in our department, we will be attending over 80 hours of Understanding Standards events this year, at enormous cost to the school in terms of cover, and in addition to training undertaken in earlier years) then the implication is surely that the standards themselves are at fault.

There seems to be little accountability. As teachers, our experience of verification is that we can fail on what seem to be utterly trivial matters that have absolutely no impact on pupil learning (I can site instances of people having unit assessments rejected from prior verification for use of what the SQA judge to be inappropriate synonyms, or minor changes in calculations, that no one else feels is of the least significance). Equally, mark schemes for external assessments can be highly prescriptive, with students penalised, for example, for using terms such as credible or dependable rather than reliable. Yet the SQA does not seem to hold itself to these same standards, and there seems to be no mechanism for addressing failings, challenging decisions or simply holding it to account for the quality of its work.

The above touches on only some of the problems currently being faced in classrooms. I am sure that you have had detailed submissions from the unions, the learned societies and others. As things stand, pupil learning is being negatively impacted, teaching is being distorted, teacher professionalism is being undermined, and the health and well-being of teachers and pupils is being put at risk. The SQA must be brought to acknowledge its contribution to the current problems; made to work much more quickly to address already recognised issues; be much more willing to concede the fundamental flaws in the current NQ systems; and, in the longer-term, a much better governance and oversight structure is required.