Dear Members of the Education and Skills Committee,

I am writing in response to your call regarding the performance of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and Education Scotland (ES).

Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) first came into being in 2004 with a broad vision and rationale which few have questioned. However, the implementation of CfE, particularly in the Senior Phase in secondary schools has been fraught with difficulty. I do not think either ES or SQA have performed well in providing the more detailed guidance and assessment instruments required or facilitating teachers to implement CfE as originally intended. Issues have been identified in numerous reports, not least of which is the OECD’s Review of Education in Scotland which actually only really addressed the 3-15 part of CfE and did not focus much attention on the Senior Phase where most of the major problems, particularly with assessment, exist.

Since becoming Cabinet Secretary for Education, John Swinney, has set a very challenging schedule for a range of actions to address many issues, tasking ES and SQA to fulfil many of these. I fear that many of the tasks requested are not in the long term best interests of Scottish education and there has been a lack of a holistic vision of implementation consistent with the overall aims of CfE. I also fear that tasking the two agencies which have been responsible for causing many of the CfE implementation problems with fixing them is not likely to be successful, especially in the timescales given. My fears have already begun to be realised as the response of ES to providing simplified guidance for teachers is for the literacy, numeracy and science areas of the curriculum is to produce a total of 154 pages containing hundreds of bullet point statements. Whilst these may well replace many of the previous CfE documents how these new benchmarks sit with previous CfE documents has not been communicated clearly. The benchmark documents are likely to be welcomed by many teachers in terms of providing clarity to the Experiences and Outcomes (E&O) but they run a serious danger of promoting an even greater tick-box culture in schools rather than supporting the more flexible and open teaching and learning intended with CfE. I think this is both a function of the nature and capabilities of ES as it is currently as an organisation and it being asked to do something on such a short timescale. There has not been time given to allow a proper review of all of the possible options, including whether all the E&O themselves are appropriate, going forward. I am concerned that in a rush to do something the opportunity for a proper review to properly address important fundamental issues is being missed.

In the Senior Phase the curriculum and its assessment is effectively set by SQA. There is research evidence that shows that in a qualification awarding body such as SQA there is always a pressure to ensure the reliability of assessment and this has a tendency to distort the validity of the assessments themselves. This means we end
up with us being confident two assessors will give the same grade to a piece of work but the work might neither be what we think it is nor would really value being assessed. This is certainly the case in many SQA physics assessments. The SQA physics assessments have been driven in a particular direction, against much of the best practice professional advice of which I am aware, by in what appears to be in many cases dogma from I am not quite sure where. I experienced this myself when on the SQA Physics Panels and on the Higher Still Development Unit committees a decade or two ago. CfE seems to have suffered from this even more greatly than previous reforms. This together with pressure from the staff involved, mostly practising teachers responsible for the verification and external marking of the assessments, to ensure the reliability of unit assessments and assignments has resulted in a bureaucratic, high pressure nightmare for teachers and more importantly the learners, our young people. The recently announced changes to National 5 and Higher that unit assessments will no longer be compulsory for achieving a course award will have minimal effect on these problems, and certainly not in the short term as the changes to Higher will not take place for two years. These changes also affect the borderline candidates the least, the very ones who are under most pressure from over assessment currently. These changes will have absolutely no effect on some of the unintended, but entirely predicted, consequences of the existing National Qualifications system. These include the reduction in the number of qualifications our young people are able to attain due to the continued insistence that SQA courses are based on a length of 160 hours, an entirely arbitrary and unnecessary decision, and that our young people staying on in school to S6 sitting three diets of SQA examinations punctuated by three “two-term dashes” of teaching and learning.

In the short term teachers are still struggling to keep up to date and make sense of the SQA documentation. SQA has not been able to communicate information in a clear concise manner. For example, in the last few days in my own department we have been looking at the SQA documentation associated with the High Physics Researching Physics unit and the associated Assignment. I therefore downloaded all and printed off all of the latest SQA documents relevant for this topic, at least I think I did. This topic is a nominal 20 hour half unit in the Higher Physics course. Several of the relevant documents were updated at the end of September, this for a course pupils started study last June and for which teachers would have liked to have prepared for before that. Several of these documents are already on their third version despite it only being the third occasion the course has run. In core documents relating to this piece of work consist of:

- Researching Physics (Higher) Unit Specification – 6 pages
- Unit Assessment Support Pack – 18 pages
- Physics Assignment General assessment information – 21 pages
- Physics Assignment Assessment Task – 22 pages
- Higher Physics Course Assessment Specification – 14 pages

A total of 81 pages of guidance across five different documents, three accessible on the main SQA website but two on the SQA Secure website which is often only accessible to teachers through their school’s SQA Co-ordinator.
There are other Higher Physics documents such as the Course Reports produced each autumn, typically 8 pages, and the Higher Physics Course and Unit Support Notes, 67 pages, which also have information relevant to this topic.

The effect of all this documentation means that it is both very difficult for teachers to be sure they are keeping up-to-date with the SQA guidance and requirements but also means that SQA staff have a great deal of work when a change is made to ensure all of the interconnected documentation is updated and consistent with each other. The unnecessary complexity of the situation is a major contribution to the bureaucracy and workload faced by many across the Scottish education system at all levels. It is very difficult to see the wood for the trees, although I am fearful that many of the trees are going to be cut down and pulped in order to print yet another version of the SQA documents.

A significant change and simplification of approach is required from SQA. Whilst it is good that SQA respond to issues and problems identified with the units and courses this has resulted in much too much “churn” in the system and this is likely to continue with further tinkering with small tweaks when issues are identified. The root cause of needing to make these tweaks is an overly complicated system of unit and course assessment and I think a proper solution will only be found with a great simplification of the whole system but this will not only require a significant culture change within SQA but also in the expectations many within education and Scotland more widely have of SQA.

I think we are at a point where we have an opportunity to take Scottish education, and certainly Scottish education in the STEM subjects, in a positive direction that is consistent with the bold original vision of CfE from 2004, more recently in reports such as the OECD review, and indeed much of the current high level rhetoric. However, we are in grave danger of yet again sticking a few more plasters on an open wound which is gradually bleeding out.

In order to make the changes needed a significant cultural shift is required throughout the education system but especially within ES and SQA. I do not think that ES or SQA currently have the capacity to do this, but more importantly it would appear that there is not the political will to really address the more systemic issues which would ultimately provide the biggest gains in the education and attainment of our young people.

In conclusion, we are at a point in time in Scottish education where, despite there being many positives and where there is much to be proud of, the status quo is resulting in a number of tensions and pressures in the education system, on teachers and on learners. I would like to see a much braver review of what is required to address the issues, including closing the attainment gap. I could go on at length and into considerable detail but some of the main issues are:

- with increased staying on rates in schools we need to move away from national examinations in S4, S5 and S6 to an “exit exam” to maximise learning and teaching time in the senior phase, this having the added benefit of reducing workload for SQA to more manageable levels
• trust teachers to conduct, with appropriate cluster collaboration and other networked support, appropriate assessments, including unit assessments through the Senior Phase, as is the case in almost every other country across the globe
• reduce the arbitrary 160 hours per course time allocation, with associated changes to course content, to enable a return to the long cherished broad Scottish education in the Senior Phase
• encourage and facilitate, but not impose, more effective collaborative cluster based teacher support structures able to draw upon external inputs from support agencies, FE and HE, industry, professional bodies and others, i.e. to strengthen the “middle” of Scottish education as described by the OECD, and which is already practised successfully through initiatives such as the SSERC primary cluster project
• increase the focus on early intervention to ensure young learners do not fall behind in their learning as once a gap is established it is very difficult to close

In 2004 CfE set out a bold vision for education in Scotland with teachers given greater freedom to determine curriculum content and pedagogy. This was bold as it required a significant change in culture not only in schools themselves but in our support agencies. This change has only been partly realised and the sorts of guidance provided by ES and SQA has often acted against this. In short, we need to now realise the vision CfE set out many years ago now where within a national framework properly supported teachers and schools can focus on providing the best possible education for all our young people. I am confident that in our small country we have the skills and expertise to address these issues given clear leadership and consistent long term support.