I am an Art and Design teacher who has experience of teaching the old Standard Grade and Higher qualifications and the new National qualifications. There are elements of the new qualifications that I feel are successful:

- Nat 5 better prepares pupils to sit Higher,
- I feel Nat 5 challenges the most able more,
- The flexibility of Unit passes ensures the most vulnerable pupils get some recognition for their work

There are a number of areas in which I feel the new qualifications are not as fair as the old system:

- Nat 4 is only pass or fail and does not reward hard working pupils – there is no motivation for them to push themselves.
- The design of the new qualifications attempts to make all subjects follow the same structure – this seems a pointless exercise as the beauty of having a range of diverse subjects is that they are inherently different from each other. Being different is a positive thing. You can still have a set of criteria to mark against without fundamentally manipulating the essence of the subject.
- Now that individual schools can decide how to organise timings pupils get across their timetable, this has removed the level playing field that existed with Standard Grade (3 periods in S3 and 3 periods in S4). I very strongly feel that this has put pupils in more deprived areas at a greater disadvantage.

I have a few subject specific points to raise:

- The new Higher Art and Design exam paper, question 1 and 2 (expressive) and 5 and 6 (design) part (b) is not an exercise in analysing art and design works, it is a problem solving exercise. This removes the opportunity for pupils to ‘read’ an art work and interpret it from their view point. Being able to do that is an excellent, transferable skill to learn and it teaches pupils that their opinions matter.

- The marking of practical work at Nat 5 and especially Higher Art and Design is not consistent. We have written to the SQA about this and the response is disappointing – it basically laid the blame at our door. The national average pass mark for Higher was very low this year; I do not believe that the talent across the country is low, and it is difficult to believe that so many teachers don’t know how to teach the course. It must be at least considered that the SQA has not communicated well enough what the pupils should produce, especially in Design.

- It is felt that in Art and Design, teachers are making ‘a rod for their own back’:
the level of work needed to gain the top marks is now so high that it could potentially impact on the numbers of pupils choosing to take the subject. If it is perceived that it is easier to get an A in another subject, pupils will do this. It is vital for the future of my subject that we can attract a range of pupils, including the most able and academic.

- We have heard that marking schemes, created by subject specialists, have changed significantly after going to the SQA. This apparently resulted in criteria that didn’t reflect what was asked in the exam or brief. I understand that this could come across as hearsay, but when a classroom teacher hears this kind of comment it does not encourage confidence in the SQA.