Experience of working with the SQA
I don’t wish to be entirely negative in this submission – but to be honest, it is very hard not to be. Someone fairly high up the education food chain said to me recently: “The SQA is responsible for almost all the problems in Scottish education.” – and they meant it.

The SQA doesn’t mean to be, I suppose. No doubt it’s full of hard-working people doing their best. But, it seems to me, the guidance from the top – and that may well include government – has resulted in a system of overwhelming bureaucracy and complexity, which detracts enormously from the learning and teaching process. (And yet, the courses which I teach are not at all bad in terms of content – if bizarrely arranged at times – a genuine and reasonably successful attempt to update the content. A shame they are ruined by what surrounds them.)

Some specifics:

Documentation
In the olden (maybe golden) days of Standard Grade, the document that told me everything I needed to know to run the course – and I mean everything – ran to 81 pages. The documentation for National 4 and National 5 is well over 1000 pages, perhaps approaching 2000 pages. It is badly-written, poorly focused, full of unnecessary verbiage – of almost no use. At least to us – whatever the specification was for the people writing these documents, ‘usefulness to teachers’ was not one of them. Not only are there 1000s of pages, there are tens of documents – each telling you to refer to at least half-a-dozen others. I have, quite literally, seen staff cry tears of frustration as they try to track down something they need to know amongst the welter of paperwork.

There is, of course, a reasonably simple solution. The SQA should be obliged to issue paper copies of their documentation to all schools. For fear of seeing their printing and copying costs go through the roof, they might then think about what is actually necessary. Because the internet essentially offers the SQA ‘free’ printing, they seem content to generate vast amounts of worthless rubbish and pass the printing costs on to schools.

Course structure at National 4 and 5
I can’t speak for all subject areas, but in the sciences, the N4 and N5 levels do not articulate well – in particular, there is a vast academic gulf between them. Very few pupils are likely to achieve N4 in S4 and then be able to achieve N5 in S5 or S6. Many schools – including mine – have significant numbers of kids for whom National 4 is far too easy, but who cannot cope with the academic demand of the National 5
exam. In the old days, General level met their needs fairly well. Also, National 5 courses have WAY too much in them to be covered in a single year.

**Assessment**

Ah, yes. Assessment. You know where it all went wrong? When the Scottish Examination Board was merged with Scotvec, and the Scotvec model won out. As a result, schools up and down Scotland are saddled with assessment practices that may be suitable for colleges, but most certainly are not suitable for schools. Ticky-box rubbish that tell teachers, kids and parents little of any value in return for way too much time spent on them.

Dr Janet Brown, head of the SQA, was recently quoted as saying “The unit assessments are absolutely rigorous and absolutely academically sound”. Well, maybe. The unit assessments are low quality. Often with mistakes. That kids ‘pass’ them tells you little of value – at National 4 in particular, they can be simple to the point of embarrassing. They are badly written, with a bizarre emphasis on some formal aspects of language quite alien to the supposed spirit of the qualifications. What seems particular odd at the moment is to compare unit assessments with the recently published Benchmarks, which are often setting a much higher standard at Level 3 than is required for National 4.

It is very important that you realise this one key point – the SQA’s assessment approach is not suitable for schools. The SQA is a commercial organisation which wants – in fact needs – to sell its services to colleges, employers, overseas schools and others – as a result, I don’t think they have really thought about the needs of Scottish schools.

I realise that the SQA is currently (if very slowly) making changes to assessments, but their fundamental philosophy remains the same – and whilst it does, things are unlikely to get much better. The SQA is driven by the Unit concept – that courses must be made up of units, and that units must be assessed. This may well suit a system where they wish to ‘sell’ units to other organisations, but it is not how life works in a school. We teach courses that have beginnings, middles and ends, where kids’ skills and knowledge develop gradually as they go along. Bolting together a set of units (often badly, and with all the associated admin and paperwork) does not make a good, meaningful and educationally valid course.

**The SQA’s attitude**

The SQA has claimed for years to be ‘listening to teachers’. Well, it doesn’t show. We’ve been telling them from the start that they have got things badly wrong; we have been treated with contempt. They are the almighty SQA and they know best. It has taken the threat of industrial action to get them – and government – to recognise that they had created a monster. However, I am afraid that I have little confidence in their ability to put things right, especially when the head of the SQA seems not to understand the issues with unit assessment.

I should point out that there are of course many individuals in the SQA who are decent people and do try their best – in an almost impossible situation – to help us. It’s interesting when you actually get an SQA person who is prepared to talk ‘off the record’ – they know what a disaster it’s been, but they just can’t say so out loud.
The effect of all this
For the last 5 years or so, our lives as teachers have been totally dominated by the SQA. Trying to understand the latest gibberish on the web-site. Emails flying back and forth to other teachers of my subject to see if we have actually got the right end of the stick. Designing courses and then having to re-design them as the rules change. The nightmare of assessment and the even more appalling experience of verification, where an organisation that can’t do its job properly and produces a qualification system of Byzantine complexity then stands in judgement on you and tells you you are doing it all wrong. Good teachers have left the profession because of what the last few years have done. There are precious few to replace them – especially in the sciences – because potential teachers see what an unholy mess this is and decide to have nothing to do with it.

Recommendations
1. Rather than ask for submissions – which you are unlikely to get given we’re all so busy thanks to doing the SQA paperwork – can I suggest you actually get into some schools and talk to staff. It won’t take you long to find out just what it’s been like over the last few years trying to cope with the SQA and all its work.

2. If I had my way…

The SQA is a monopoly, and shows all the negative traits of monopolies – unresponsive, utterly convinced of its own importance and unwilling to respond to the genuine needs of its ‘customers’.

Several people have suggested that Scottish schools should look south of the border for a qualifications provider. I can see why they think this, but I don’t suppose it’s likely to happen. Perhaps what might happen is that the SQA could be split, with one separately governed part of it dealing with qualifications for schools. Perhaps then it might recognise the particular needs of schools, not be driven by the need to market units to colleges and employers, and perhaps be able to establish a positive relationship with teachers, pupils and parents.

Something has to change – and it needs to be more than just a few tweaks to internal assessment procedures. As it stands, I am not sure that the SQA is fit for purpose. And still less sure that, when government has finally accepted that the SQA’s approach has generated an impossible workload for precious little return, simply asking the SQA to ‘fix’ it is the way to go. The evidence suggests that, as an organisation, it cannot provide schools with the service schools need. So why give an unreformed organisation another go at it – don’t be surprised if you end up with the same result.

I am sorry to be so negative. We have much to be proud of in Scottish education. It’s just that recent curricular reform, and the SQA’s part in it, has taken much of the joy out of the job.