Anonymous Submission

I am an Exams Officer (known as the SQA Coordinator in most Scottish schools) in an Independent Day School.

In my experience the SQA is by far the best of the major awarding bodies in the UK, and due to the nature of my school I have interacted with all of the major awarding bodies to a greater or lesser extent other than CCEA and City and Guilds.

They go to great lengths to engage with those who need to operate their systems at the school end and have always been very helpful whenever I have had to go to them for assistance with a problem.

Whenever any candidate/exam related issue has arisen they have always, in my experience, proceeded from a position of making sure that the candidate is treated fairly and have at times gone to great lengths to ensure this. I would sum this up as a “can do” approach in terms of making sure that candidates are not disadvantaged and that a level playing field operates; with the side issues/fallout etc being dealt with between the SQA and the Centre after the candidate has been properly treated.

The only significant error that I can point to on their part recently would be the formatting of the unit assessments for the CfE courses. Although in keeping with the CfE approach unit level assessments without a time limit and with “correct statements” instead of marks was never going to be successful in a teaching profession where the bulk of the senior phase teachers previous experience with unit level assessment was with the old NABs from Higher Still. Particularly when we consider that in many cases up to five alternate versions of a given unit NAB were supplied as part of the Higher Still roll out. The idea that teachers used to operating in that way, and therefore without significant experience of writing their own unit level assessments, would embrace the “opportunity” to write a sufficient number of their own assessments to meet unit reassessment needs was, somewhat optimistic.

Exam headlines in recent years have focused on a Higher Maths paper, a National 5 Maths paper, and a Higher English paper. In the case of Higher Maths and National 5 Maths we were not directly involved so I could offer only speculation and rumour. In the case of Higher English a question paper had to be replaced because (according to the grapevine) someone said something they should not have said and the SQA acted as quickly and as efficiently as could be expected to get the replacement papers to schools. i.e. the fault (according to the grapevine) was not the SQA’s but they still managed to deal with it.

Exam questions that I have had some first-hand experience of that might have been better constructed are limited to; if I recall correctly, the Higher (?) English question based on an article decrying the sense of letting 16 and 17 year olds vote which if memory serves was on the same day as the last Scottish parliament election. To be
fair this may have occurred due to the need to replace the question paper noted above.

Colleagues from other centres conducting verification visits for the SQA have always been polite, cooperative and helpful as they no doubt would expect others to be if it were those colleagues schools who were the receiving end of the verification visit.

The only detail with SQA’s operations that may be a cause for concern in my mind at the moment is the large number of roles that are filled by classroom colleagues taking on additional work in their own time and/or being released from their schools for a day or two at a time to carry out work for the SQA. On the one hand this provides invaluable experience that can be taken back to be shared within that colleagues school. On the other hand if an imbalance in where those colleagues are drawn from occurs, due perhaps to a work to rule, then the system could potentially become accidentally skewed one way or another due to a narrowing in the background of the teachers performing those roles. Unfortunately I struggle to see a way of maintaining the advantages of this approach without also maintaining the potential risk.