EXTERNAL VALIDATION GUIDELINES

Implementation document for School Excellence Policy

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Document history

Version	Date	Description	Approved by
1.0.0	February 2021	Initial publication to align with the 2021 School Excellence cycle	Deputy Secretary, School Performance – South
1.0.1	26/02/2024	Updates to reflect changes to external validation process for 2024	A/Executive Director, School Excellence

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1 Introduction

The School Excellence cycle is underpinned by the School Excellence Framework (SEF) and supportsall NSW public schools in the pursuit of excellence. The SEF provides a clear description of effective practice across the key educational domains of learning, teaching and leading, and informs and guidesdecision-making by principals.

While improvement efforts are designed, driven and assessed on an ongoing basis by each school, an external process is important for providing an assurance to the school and the system that the progress being made aligns with the expectations articulated in the SEF. External validation is an integral and deliberate element of school planning and supports effective self-assessment to inform high impact strategic directions. External validation is not an inspection. It provides an opportunity for schools to discuss their judgements about the school's practice, and the evidence that underpins them, with a panelof peers.

2 Context

The external validation process supports excellence in NSW public schools. School improvement is grounded in rigorous self-assessment and analysis of the school's current situation with respect to student outcomes and teaching and leadership practices. Schools regularly collect, analyse and evaluatea range of quantitative and qualitative data and evidence as part of ongoing self-assessment practices.

Section 1.11 of the School Excellence Policy specifies that once during the four-year School Excellence cycle, each school will undertake an external validation of evidence of their school self-assessment. Schools engage in discussions with an external panel and have their self-assessments validated using the School Excellence Framework. Alignment of school planning and external validation cycles allows schools to use the knowledge and feedback gained from the external validation process to inform their situational analysis and to develop or further refine strategies to target identified areas for improvement through their Strategic Improvement Plan. A new Strategic Improvement Plan is developed following external validation.

These guidelines are to be used in conjunction with the School Excellence Policy and School Excellence Procedure implementation document.

3 Enquiries

For further information or to request support regarding external validation and SPaRO, please contact:

Strategic School Improvement – for information about external validation scheduling and SPaROE:

validation@det.nsw.edu.au
T: 02 7814 3853
W: School Excellence in Action

Principals, School Leadership and External Validation – for information about external validation submissions, professional learning and Principal, School Leadership (PSL) support

E: pslcoord@det.nsw.edu.au

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4 External validation procedures

4.1 Schedule

Each year approximately one quarter of NSW public schools undertake external validation. Schools have been assigned to one of four School Excellence cohorts (A, B, C, D), for the purpose of external validation during the four-year School Excellence cycle.

In Term 3 of the year prior to external validation, schools are notified of their participation date, format and time of their panel meeting via email to the school account. This will be completed by the end of Week 6 Term3.

External validation meetings will usually take place:

- during the designated period (specific weeks to be confirmed each year)
- on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday throughout the scheduled period
- starting at 9.30am as per external validation notification
- for up to 2.5 hours to accommodate a discussion of approximately 30 minutes with respect to the school's future directions.

Note – Refer to School Excellence Procedure (PDF 289 KB) implementation document for advice on requesting avariation to scheduling for an external validation panel meeting (section 6.3).

4.2 Implementation

External validation panel meetings will be scheduled using a combination of online and face-to-face formats. Where possible panel meetings will alternate between face-to-face and online format with each new cycle.

Note – Face-to-face meetings may be moved online during the external validation period, in response to departmental advice.

- In the two weeks prior to the panel meeting, a unique meeting (via Microsoft Teams) will be created by Strategic School Improvement (SSI) for each participating school including schools scheduled to meet face-to-face
- the lead panellist and peer principal will be assigned owner access to the Team
- the lead panellist will add the school principal to the Team and assign them owner access
- the school principal will manage the addition of participants to the meeting, including the Director, Educational Leadership (DEL) and the network Principal, School Leadership (PSL), if they are invited to the meeting.

Note – All schools will have a unique MS Team created for them as a contingency for a change in meeting format.

4.3 SPaRO

The School Planning and Reporting Online (SPaRO) software provides an online integrated process for schools to efficiently plan, self-assess and report. Schools, panels and DELs use SPaRO to prepare forand participate in the external validation process.

SPaRO is used:

- to support schools with embedded, ongoing self-assessment practices, including the collection of evidence to support effective evaluative practices
- by schools to create evidence sets and finalise the external validation submission
- by DELs to review and affirm the external validation submission

- by panels to view and validate the external validation submission and to complete the panel report.

SPaRO is available through the NSW Department of Education staff portal. The external validation panelwill be provided read-only access to the relevant school in SPaRO two weeks prior to the panel meeting.

4.4   Resources and professional learning

Resources have been developed to contribute to a shared understanding and consistent approach across schools to evidence collection, analysis and self-assessment, to inform strategic improvementschool planning. The following support is available to assist in preparing for external validation, developing the submission and actions following external validation:

- [Self-assessment and external validation support](#) – Information and advice regarding ongoing self-assessment and external validation can be accessed via the department's intranet.
- Sample evidence sets can be found in the resources section on the SPaRO homepage.
- [SPaRO how-to videos](#) can be accessed on the SPaRO support page.
- 'School Excellence: Supporting schools with external validation – an online course is available to all schools via MyPL. The principal and those staff who are part of the school external validation team preparing for external validation will complete this professional learning in order to develop a foundational understanding of the external validation purpose, process and requirements.
- External validation [process flow chart (PDF 280 KB)](#)
- [School Excellence in Action](#) – A comprehensive resource to support the delivery of the School Excellence cycle for schools.

4.5   Process evaluation

The information and data, including feedback from participants, gathered during external validation is reviewed at the end of each year to further develop professional knowledge and practice, and informfuture directions for the external validation process.

Section 4.4 of the School Excellence Policy states that, 'The Group Director, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation liaises with the Directors, PSL and External Validation, Strategic School Improvement and School Excellence, to report to the Secretary on data from the School ExcellenceFramework Self-assessment Survey and external validation process'.

5   External validation submission

Ongoing self-assessment supports school improvement by ensuring critical and timely assessment of progress and achievement on performance.

The external validation submission consists of:

- sets of **evidence** developed to validate the school's on-balance judgement for identified element/s of the SEF. This includes school-developed evidence sets for eight of the SEF elements, and system data and evidence provided directly to the panel through SPaRO to validate the school's on-balance judgement for the remaining six identified element/s of the SEF
- an **executive summary (optional)**, providing a brief narrative of the school's point-in-time judgements againstthe three domains of the SEF
- a completed School Excellence Framework Self-assessment Survey (**SEF S-aS**)
- the **Director, Educational Leadership affirmation** of the school's submission.

Schools prepare their external validation submission in SPaRO and complete their submission twoweeks prior to the panel meeting (excluding school holidays).

5.1   Evidence

The school reviews the evidence gathered through ongoing self-assessment and develops evidence sets

that provide explanation, evaluation and clarification of the links between the evidence sets selected, practices across the school and the school's SEF S-aS judgements. It is not necessary for a school to include all evidence used for self-assessment in the external validation submission.

Schools need to include carefully selected, robust examples of evidence indicative of the general practices across the school and their impact, validating the school's on-balance judgement for identified element/s of the SEF. The number of evidence sets per submission will be determined by the school, ensuring each set contains effective and carefully selected artefacts which are annotated and analysed to clearly link to and provide evidence across multiple SEF elements. Additional information regarding updates to the external validation process in 2024, including a suggested list of evidence, is available on the Strategic School Improvement webpages

Note: All evidence must be saved in the SPaRO evidence bank. Artefacts within a set can be presented as an image, document or multimedia file and schools can use a variety of formats within each set to ensure adequate information is provided.
It is not possible to present an external validation submission in video format as each evidence set must be supported by written annotations and an analysis.

Evidence sets will consist of:

- annotated data and evidence, and analysis prepared by the school and uploaded into SPaRO for the elements: Learning culture; Wellbeing; Curriculum; Assessment; Effective classroom practice; Learning and development; Data skills and use; Educational leadership.
- System data provided directly to the panel through SPaRO* for the elements: Reporting; Student performance measures; Professional standards; School planning, implementation and reporting; School resources; Management practices and processes.

It is optional for schools to provide additional evidence and annotations for the elements where systemdata is provided directly to the panel through SPaRO.

***Note** – all schools will provide, as part of their evidence, a de-identified student report for each stage of learning. No annotation of these reports is required.

Annotating and analysing evidence is an important aspect to consider when preparing the school submission.

- The annotation provides the context for the selected piece or group of evidence. It describes what, when how and why the evidence is significant.
- An analysis provides explanation, evaluation and clarification of a collection of evidence. It provides links to practices across the school and validates the school's on-balance judgement for identified element/s of the SEF.

Evidence sets need to be uploaded to the '<calendar year> Submission' folder in SPaRO.

5.2   Executive summary - optional

The executive summary provides a brief narrative of the school's point-in-time judgements in the threeSEF domains: learning, teaching and leading. It is a synthesis of the school's self-assessment.

The executive summary is entered into four text boxes in the SPaRO software under the relevantheadings. The recommended length for an executive summary is one to two pages.

Note: From 2024, schools will have the option to include an executive summary as part of the submission or rely solely on the analysis to provide the links to practices across the school which support the validation of the school's on-balance judgement for identified element/s of the SEF.

5.3　SEF S-aS

The SEF S-aS is designed to support each school to capture a 'point-in-time' judgement that has been informed by their ongoing self-assessment processes using the SEF. Evidence is evaluated to determinean on-balance judgement of which stage best describes the school's practices for each element of the SEF. The external validation panel carefully considers information provided by the school including the on-balance judgements and the supporting evidence. The panel determines whether the school's on- balance judgements, and the supporting evidence, align with the descriptors and statements articulated in the SEF for each element.

Schools access, complete and submit an EV SEF S-aS for the current year through SPaRO.

Note – Schools that complete a SEF S-aS as part of the external validation process are not required to resubmit an additional survey as part of the annual requirement for that year. The following options are available for these schools:

- Option 1 – No action

- Option 2 – Edit and resubmit validated EV SEF S-aS

- Option 3– Create a new SEF S-aS to complete and submit

In those situations where there is an element or elements not validated by the panel at the level selectedby the school, the panel's view will be the final outcome of validation and the school will update their SEFS-aS to reflect the validated judgement of the panel.

5.4　Director affirmation

The Director, Educational Leadership works collaboratively with the school to ensure that they are ableto affirm that the external validation submission is an accurate representation of the school's processesin planning, self-assessment and reporting.

The DEL is able to view and affirm the submission in SPaRO once completed by the school two weeks prior to the meeting date. The Director, Educational Leadership affirmation must be completed before the panel meeting.

Best practice is for the DEL to have ongoing conversation with the school's external validation teamduring the time that evidence sets are being developed, to enable the DEL to affirm the school's submission.

Where a DEL is unable to affirm the external validation submission as 'an accurate representation of the school's processes in planning, self-assessment and reporting', the DEL will contact the principal to resolve any issues.

If the matter cannot be resolved prior to the panel date, the DEL will consult with the principal anddetermine if the panel meeting will be rescheduled.

1. If the DEL determines that a change of date is required:
   a. The DEL advances the request to the Executive Director, School Performance for theSchool Performance Directorate.
   b. The Executive Director, School Performance will consider the merits of changing the date and, if endorsed, will forward the request to the Director, Principals, School Leadership and External Validation.
   c. The Director, Principals, School Leadership and External Validation will arrange a changeof date and the school will be advised.
2. If a change to the external validation date is not endorsed by the Executive Director, School Performance, the school is advised through the Director, Educational Leadership and the meeting will take place as scheduled.

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6 External validation panel

6.1 Composition of the panel

The external validation panel is an independent panel, consisting of two principals:

- Lead panellist – a Principal, School Leadership (PSL).
- Peer principal – an experienced, substantive principal of another school.

See section 4(b) for additional meeting participants.

6.2 Role of the panel

The role of the panel is to determine whether the school's evidence, including data provided directly to the panel, supports the judgements made in the School Excellence Framework Self- assessment Survey (SEF S-aS) for each element of the SEF. The panel:

- reviews the external validation submission, including the data provided directly through SPaRO
- meets with the school external validation team to engage in a discussion regarding the evidence presented and to ask clarifying questions
- considers all evidence using the standards articulated in the SEF and determines the panel judgement for each element of the SEF
- finalises the 'School determined next steps to support self-evaluation'
- discusses the 'School determined future directions to support school improvement'
- prepares the external validation report.

7 External validation meeting

7.1 Prior to the panel meeting

Prior to the panel meeting:

- the school external validation team prepares for professional discussion and reflection during the panel meeting. It is recommended that the 'School determined next steps to support self-evaluation' and 'School determined future directions to support school improvement' are considered and drafted by the school external validation team in preparation for the panel meeting. These will then be discussed as part of the panel meeting with the view of identifying any other value-add opportunities to support the school's strategic improvement planning.
- the lead panellist and peer principal meet (either virtually or face-to-face) to review the school's submission and to develop questions for the school external validation team for those areas where further clarification may be required to support the school's on-balance judgements.

7.2 Participants

The following will attend the panel meeting:

- External validation panel, consisting of a lead panellist (PSL) and peer principal
- School external validation team, including the principal and additional members of the school community as decided by the school principal.

As the external validation process will inform the development of an updated Strategic Improvement Plan (SIP), the school may consider inviting the DEL and network PSL to attend the panel meeting. This enables a collaborative approach to support schools as they implement all aspects of the School Excellence cycle. This is not mandatory.

7.3 During the panel meeting

The following table provides a possible scaffold for the external validation panel meeting. **Note** – timingsare indicative only.

Process	Description
Framing (approx. 5 mins)	The lead panellist frames the structure and intentions of the panel meeting.
Overview (approx. 5 mins)	The school external validation team discusses the school context, vision, current strategic directions and school planning process.
Illustration (approx. 5 mins)	The school external validation team discusses how they made on- balance judgements using the SEF. They elaborate on how the body of evidence demonstrates their self-assessment.
Inquiry (approx. 45 mins)	The school submission should provide enough information to validate each of the elements. However, the panel may ask clarifying questions to further understand the school's on-balance judgements. If required, schools may discuss additional evidence during the panel meeting. This evidence is not added to the submission but can be taken into consideration by the panel.
Validation (approx. 45 mins)	The external validation panel thoroughly considers information provided by the school, including the on-balance judgements. The panel determines whether the schools on-balance judgements, supported by evidence, align with the expectations articulated in the SEF.
Next steps (approx. 15 mins)	The school reflects on their self-assessment processes to determine how these may be improved and embedded in their future practices. This information may be provided by the school for inclusion in the report or may occur as a result of discussions with the panel. The lead panellist will include this text in the 'School determined next steps to support self-evaluation' section in SPaRO.
Future directions (approx. 30 mins)	The future directions are determined by the school and entered into SPaRO. Following the external validation meeting, future directions can be further refined, if required, to support the development of the Strategic Improvement Plan.

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8 External validation report

A report will be prepared and finalised directly after the panel meeting as a record of the meeting and is available to the principal, Director,Educational Leadership and the Strategic School Improvement team through the SPaRO software.

8.1 Meeting participants

Members attending the panel meeting are recorded on the panel report in SPaRO through the +Add EVteam button. Only those present during the panel meeting should be included as school team memberson the panel report.

8.2 On-balance judgements

The on-balance judgements for each element of the SEF are recorded in the panel report. This captures:

- the school's on-balance judgement prior to the panel meeting
- the panel's overall judgement based on the evidence provided, the conversation during the panel visit and any additional data or evidence provided during the panel meeting.

8.3 Validation panel comments

A statement is generated for each domain of the SEF based on the school's on-balance judgements andthe external validation panel's determination. The statement identifies the number of elements in each domain where the school's self-assessment is consistent with the panel's judgement and is, therefore, validated. Where the school and panel judgements are different, the statement identifies the element andstage of excellence determined by the panel.

8.4 School determined next steps to support self-evaluation

The purpose of the next steps section of the panel report is to identify how the school will refine their self-assessment practices using the SEF to support continuous school improvement. The next steps are discussed and finalised during the panel meeting. Adjustments to this section cannot be made once the panel report is finalised.

8.5 School determined future directions to support school improvement

The purpose of the future directions section of the panel report is to identify opportunities for improvement in reference to specific elements of the SEF. The future directions are discussed during the panel meeting and included in the panel report. Adjustments to this section cannot be made once the panel report is finalised. They can be further refined, if required, in consultation with the Director, Educational Leadership and network PSL following the panel meeting. Additional elements and opportunities for improvement can be included in this section by adding progress meeting notes in SPaRO. The future directions will inform the development of the school's Strategic Improvement Plan.

9 Action following external validation

Following the panel meeting, the DEL and network PSL work collaboratively with the school leadershipteam to discuss the external validation outcomes and refine the 'School determined future directions tosupport school improvement' section of the panel report.

The submission, panel report and areas of improvement identified through the external validationprocess are used:
- for professional conversations and to lead discussions with the school community
- to inform the school's self-assessment processes and situational analysis
- to adjust future practices and inform the development of the school's new four-year Strategic Improvement Plan.

9.1 Role of the principal, Principal, School Leadership and Director, Educational Leadership

Section 4 of the School Excellence policy outlines the responsibilities and delegations of the principal, PSL and DEL for all aspects of the School Excellence cycle. Principals, PSLs and DELs each have an important role in supporting the external validation process. Additionally, the PSL will have two distinct roles:

- Network PSL – providing support to schools in their principal network, where requested
- Lead panellist (PSL) – leading the external validation panel meeting process.

Note – PSLs will not lead external validation panels for those schools where there is a real or perceived conflict of interest.

9.2 Principal

Prior to the panel meeting, the principal will:

- lead the school in embedded, ongoing self-assessment practices
- ensure relevant school staff complete the 'School Excellence: Supporting schools with external validation' professional learning, online via MyPL
- lead and guide the development of evidence sets to support the school's self-assessment and ensure all evidence is uploaded into the <year> Submission folder in SPaRO
- submit the current year SEF S-aS, lock the submission folder and submit the executive summary in SPaRO, two weeks prior to the panel meeting (excluding school holidays)
- consider and draft the 'School determined next steps to support self-evaluation' and 'School determined future directions to support school improvement' in preparation for and further consideration at the panel meeting
- liaise with the lead panellist to finalise panel meeting organisation
- add relevant staff to the online panel meeting via Microsoft Teams.

During the panel meeting, the principal will:

- collaboratively guide the school's response to clarifying questions regarding on-balance judgements for identified element/s of the SEF
- discuss and confirm the 'School determined next steps to support self-evaluation' with the panel for inclusion in the panel report
- discuss the 'School determined future directions to support school improvement' with the panel.

Following external validation, the principal will:

- take appropriate action to implement the 'School determined next steps to support self-evaluation' and continue to lead the school in embedded, ongoing self-assessment practices
- consult with the DEL and network PSL to further refine the 'School determined future directions to support school improvement', as part of the updating and approval of the school's Strategic Improvement Plan.

9.3 Network PSL

Prior to the panel meeting, the network PSL will:

- support schools so that relevant staff complete the 'School Excellence: Supporting schools with external validation' professional learning, online via MyPL
- work collaboratively with principals and school teams (when requested), to guide the preparation of the school's external validation submission including the identification of 'School determined future directions to support school improvement'.

Following external validation, the network PSL will:

- consult with the school principal and the DEL to finalise the 'School determined future directions to support school improvement' section of the panel report
- support the school in the development of their Strategic Improvement Plan
- provide ongoing support for strategic improvement planning, self-assessment and annual reporting processes.

Note – As the external validation process will inform the development of an updated Strategic Improvement Plan, the school may consider inviting the network PSL to attend the panel meeting.

9.4 Lead panellist (PSL)

Prior to the panel meeting, the lead panellist will:

- support the delivery of peer principal professional learning
- contact the school principal to discuss meeting processes and protocols
- assign to the principal administrator access to the online panel meeting via Microsoft Teams
- access the school's submission in SPaRO during the two weeks prior to the panel meeting
- meet with the peer principal to consider the school's submission
- verify that there has been Director, Educational Leadership affirmation prior to the panel meeting.

During the panel meeting, the lead panellist will:

- meet with the school external validation team to discuss the submission, ask questions to clarify their understanding and make connections between the evidence presented and the school's on-balance judgements
- lead the external validation meeting with a peer principal
- validate the school's on-balance judgement or identify element/s where the school's self-assessment is not consistent with the evidence presented using the SEF. Where the panel's determination differs from the school's on-balance judgement, the panel will discuss the reason for this determination with the school team. The panel's decision is reflected in the panel report
- discuss and confirm the 'School determined next steps to support self-evaluation' with the school for inclusion in the panel report
- discuss the 'School determined future directions to support school improvement' with the school
- prepare and finalise relevant sections of the external validation panel report in SPaRO.

9.5 Directors, Educational Leadership

Prior to the panel meeting, the DEL will:

- support each principal to engage in all aspects of the School Excellence cycle
- work collaboratively with principals and school teams to prepare the school's external validation submission
- affirm the school's submission as being an accurate representation of the school's processes in planning, self-assessment and reporting as per requirement 4.3.6 of the School Excellence Policy. The Director, Educational Leadership affirmation is completed in SPaRO once the school's submission is finalised and prior to the panel meeting.

Following external validation, the DEL will:

- consult with the school principal and the network PSL to finalise the 'School determined future directions to support school improvement' section of the panel report in SPaRO
- engage in regular professional conversations with the principal regarding the school's Strategic Improvement Plan, self-assessment and annual reporting processes.

Note – As the external validation process will inform the development of an updated Strategic Improvement Plan, the school may consider inviting the DEL to attend the panel meeting. This is notmandatory.

10   Peer principal role

10.1   Nomination

Substantive, experienced principals apply for the role of peer principal through an Expression of Interest (EOI) process. Directors, Educational Leadership should encourage suitable principals to apply as a result of regular collegial discussions regarding professional growth and development.

All peer principal nominees will discuss the opportunity with their DEL and seek endorsement before submitting their application. Once the application process is complete, the list of peer principal nomineeswill be reviewed and endorsed by the relevant Directors, Educational Leadership.

10.2   Eligibility

Peer principals will:

- be a substantive principal
- have a minimum of three years' experience in a principal role
- have DEL endorsement to participate in the role.

Note – Where a principal is not substantive in their current role, but has a minimum of three years' experience in a principal role and demonstrates the capacity to be an effective part of the externalvalidation panel, their inclusion as a peer principal is possible at the discretion of the Director, Educational Leadership and Director, Principals, School Leadership and External Validation.

10.3   Responsibilities

Peer principals will:

- complete professional learning to understand the role of a panel member in the processesof self-assessment and validation using the School Excellence Framework
- read the submission and meet with the lead panellist prior to the panel meeting, to consider the school's evidence
- engage as a panel member in external validation processes with participating schools.

11   Confidentiality and conflict of interest

11.1   Conflict of interest

Prior to scheduling, panel members identify schools and principal networks where there may be a potential or perceived conflict of interest. Additionally, as soon as they are notified of their panel allocation, the PSL and peer principal must declare any potential or perceived conflict of interest (via email to validation@det.nsw.edu.au). If determined that a conflict of interest exist, the panel member/swill not be assigned to that school.

11.2   Evidence sets

All evidence prepared by schools should be carefully reviewed to ensure that the inclusion of informationis consistent with privacy and personal information policies. The principal is responsible for ensuring thatthe information provided does not enable individual students or staff to be identified.

11.3 SPaRO

The panel will be given access to the school's submission through the SPaRO software. The lead panellist is responsible for ensuring appropriate disposal of all submission material.

11.4 Meeting

Panel members may take notes during the panel meeting to support the preparation of the panel report. All digital and paper materials used by the panel will be securely disposed of following the external validation process. The panel meeting will not be recorded.

12 New schools

Each new school will participate in an external validation process within the first four years of opening. The year of external validation will be negotiated between the DEL and school principal, and communicated to the Director, Principals, School Leadership and External Validation as soon as is practical after the school opens. However, it is recommended that new schools not be required to participate in the external validation process until after 12 months of operation.

The external validation process will inform the development of an updated four-year StrategicImprovement Plan, to be implemented in the year following external validation.

13 Colleges

Multiple campuses of the same college will participate in external validation in the same year, but not necessarily at the same time. Each individual school, with a unique school code, is required to developand submit evidence that is reflective of their individual campus context to determine their on-balance judgements using the SEF.

The executive/college principal plays an important role in the planning and reporting cycle of a college and as such will have an ongoing role in self-assessment. Depending on the local context, organisationand structure of the college, the executive/college principal may participate in the collaborative preparation of the campus' external validation submission with the campus leadership team and/or the panel meeting.

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