

# Foreword

Since their launch in 2011 the Cambridge learner attributes – **confident, responsible, reflective, innovative, engaged** – have been an increasingly visible design principle in the curricula of thousands of Cambridge schools worldwide.

I am often struck when I visit schools by the original ways in which the Cambridge learner attributes are promoted and supported. It was precisely our intention in launching the attributes that they would encourage schools, drawing on well-evidenced ideas about learning, to shape distinctive curricula suitable to their circumstances and contexts.

This new guide revisits the insights into learning and teaching on which the Cambridge learner attributes are built, and suggests how schools can interpret the attributes in a practical way to improve the value of the education they offer. The guide will be useful both for seasoned Cambridge schools looking to make further improvements to the curriculum, and for schools new to Cambridge and wishing to start from a clear understanding of our approach. It is an empowering approach, in which we aim to help schools adopt tools, well-evidenced ideas and flexible resources in order to shape a curriculum which belongs uniquely to the school.

Today's educators are not permitted complacency: everywhere we see, if not downright dissatisfaction with education, then strident demands for improvement. Central to those demands is the idea that students should emerge from the compulsory years of education equipped not only with core knowledge and literacies, but with the abilities and dispositions necessary to be effective life-long learners. When education theories are turned to for help in meeting this challenge, two questions confront schools – how to assess the soundness of a theory, and how to apply it successfully in the classroom.

I believe this guide will answer both needs, by explaining the solid foundations on which the Cambridge learner attributes are based, and showing how to make use of the attributes for the benefit of learners.

**Michael O'Sullivan, Chief Executive,  
Cambridge Assessment International Education**

# The Cambridge learner attributes

| Cambridge learners |  | Cambridge teachers  |
|--------------------|--|---|
| <b>Confident</b>   | <p><b>Confident</b> in working with information and ideas – their own and those of others.</p> <p>Cambridge learners are confident, secure in their knowledge, unwilling to take things for granted and ready to take intellectual risks. They are keen to explore and evaluate ideas and arguments in a structured, critical and analytical way. They are able to communicate and defend views and opinions as well as respect those of others.</p> | <p><b>Confident</b> in teaching their subject and engaging each student in learning.</p> <p>Cambridge teachers know their subject well and know how to teach it. They seek to understand their students and their educational needs. They strive to communicate a love of learning and to encourage students to engage actively in their own learning.</p>          |
| <b>Responsible</b> | <p><b>Responsible</b> for themselves, responsive to and respectful of others.</p> <p>Cambridge learners take ownership of their learning, set targets and insist on intellectual integrity. They are collaborative and supportive. They understand that their actions have impacts on others and on the environment. They appreciate the importance of culture, context and community.</p>   | <p><b>Responsible</b> for themselves, responsive to and respectful of others.</p> <p>Cambridge teachers are highly professional in their approach to teaching and they are collaborative and supportive. They understand their actions will help shape future generations and they are concerned about the holistic development of every individual they teach.</p> |
| <b>Reflective</b>  | <p><b>Reflective</b> as learners, developing their ability to learn.</p> <p>Cambridge learners understand themselves as learners. They are concerned with the processes as well as the products of their learning and develop the awareness and strategies to be life-long learners.</p>   | <p><b>Reflective</b> as learners themselves, developing their practice.</p> <p>Cambridge teachers are themselves learners, seeking to build on and develop their knowledge and skills through a virtuous circle of reflection on practice – involving research, evaluation and adaptation. They support students to become independent and reflective learners.</p> |
| <b>Innovative</b>  | <p><b>Innovative</b> and equipped for new and future challenges.</p> <p>Cambridge learners welcome new challenges and meet them resourcefully, creatively and imaginatively. They are capable of applying their knowledge and understanding to solve new and unfamiliar problems. They can adapt flexibly to new situations requiring new ways of thinking.</p>  | <p><b>Innovative</b> and equipped for new and future challenges.</p> <p>Cambridge teachers are creative, experimenting with new ideas and pursuing an enquiring approach in their teaching. They are open to new challenges, being resourceful, imaginative and flexible. They are always ready to learn and apply new skills and techniques.</p>                   |
| <b>Engaged</b>     | <p><b>Engaged</b> intellectually and socially, ready to make a difference.</p> <p>Cambridge learners are alive with curiosity, embody a spirit of enquiry and want to dig more deeply. They are keen to learn new skills and are receptive to new ideas. They work well independently but also with others. They are equipped to participate constructively in society and the economy – locally, nationally and globally.</p>                       | <p><b>Engaged</b> intellectually, professionally and socially, ready to make a difference.</p> <p>Cambridge teachers are passionate about learning within and beyond the classroom, sharing their knowledge and skills with teachers in the wider educational community.</p>  |

# Introduction

What are the learning habits students need to be successful in school, higher education, the workplace and life in general? This question inspired the development of the Cambridge learner attributes in 2011.

Since we introduced the attributes a number of schools and teachers have asked us for more guidance. This guide is a response to that request. It is intended to complement the *Implementing the Curriculum with Cambridge* guide and the *Developing your School with Cambridge* guide, as well as other resources on the teaching and learning area of our website ([www.cambridgeinternational.org/teaching-and-learning](http://www.cambridgeinternational.org/teaching-and-learning)).

The purpose of the Cambridge learner and teacher attributes is to support the development of five powerful and highly desirable learning habits that will inspire students to love learning and help them to lead fulfilled and successful lives. Students who demonstrate the attributes habitually approach learning by being confident, responsible, reflective, innovative and engaged. They are able to skilfully employ a broad range of cognitive skills and socio-emotional skills (including personal qualities such as resilience, self-motivation and self-regulation) towards effectively managing their performance.

The attributes are interdependent and should be viewed as a whole. Confidence, for example, needs to be grounded in reflection and responsibility so that the learner demonstrates skill and humility in judging how confident they can be that they are right. Learners need to be confident to be innovative, ready to take intellectual risks and not be frightened of making mistakes because they view these as a learning opportunity.

The learner attributes need to be infused into the teaching and learning of all disciplines, subjects and activities. Effective practice starts with small changes, in particular developing a climate that helps to nurture the attributes. Nothing is more important than teachers modelling the attributes and so the teacher attributes correspond to the learner attributes.

A great deal has been written about the failure of some school systems to prepare students properly for life in higher education and the modern world. Too much attention, it is argued, is given to preparing students for examinations instead of developing the learning habits needed to be effective independent learners and team problem solvers. One dangerous misconception is that teachers have to teach to the test to get the highest grades for students. We know that teaching students to be good learners not only prepares them for university and life, it will also result in higher grades in high-stakes assessments.

We hope that this guide will stimulate discussion and the sharing of practice between schools. One of the main sources for the material presented here has been presentations and discussions at Cambridge Schools Conferences over the past six years. These events will continue to provide rich materials and perspectives. To help us create this guide schools from 15 countries have volunteered case studies to share their experiences and practices. We are very grateful for their contributions (see [Appendix 2](#) for a summary of participating schools).

Our mission at Cambridge International is to support schools around the world to give students the best education for life. Our qualifications and educational programmes are well designed for this purpose. However, they must be supported by effective teaching, learning and leadership practices. This guide, along with all our professional development activities, will help teachers to develop their classroom practice to improve student outcomes. It will also support school leaders to understand what effective schools look like – and how to become one.

# Chapter overviews

## How to use this guide

Schools use Cambridge programmes and qualifications in more than 160 countries. Each one of these schools is a unique community with its own identity. We believe that one curriculum prescription or educational approach can never be suitable for all. This guide will help school leaders, governors, proprietors, teachers, parents and students think about how to engage with the learner attributes in their own contexts. Only you know your school and its community, and only you can drive school improvement. Our role is to support you in making the right decisions for your school.

What teachers do in the classroom has the biggest impact on student learning, so much of this guide focuses on effective teaching practice. Teachers themselves need to exemplify the attributes in everything they do: teachers are learners, which is why the attributes are the same for teachers and learners.

Education, however, does not begin or end in the classroom, so we have also given attention to the co-curricular programme and developing a school culture of learning. Throughout the guide we also make references to resources for schools and to complementary programmes run by other organisations.

**Chapter 1** The learner attributes are closely related to a wide range of educational ideas and approaches and cannot be considered in isolation. Chapter 1 explores some of these and introduces some of the themes that are considered in more detail in later chapters.

**Chapter 2** builds on the ideas presented in Chapter 1. It considers the characteristics of a broad, balanced and coherent curriculum that schools need to support the development of the learner attributes. The second part of the chapter focuses on a supportive co-curricular programme.

**Chapter 3** looks at the attribute of reflection and the related concept of learning how to learn. It explores the concept that schools need to have a learning, rather than a performance, orientation with reflection at its heart.

**Chapter 4** considers innovation and creativity. These are fundamental to all academic disciplines and educational activities, not just the arts.

**Chapter 5** looks at the profound impacts of wellbeing and stress on learning and performance, considering the pressures today's students are under. We also look at strategies to deal with stress.

**Chapter 6** focuses on how schools can broaden the educational experiences of students through activities designed to nurture confidence, responsibility, compassion and wisdom. These activities have a particular focus on service learning and student leadership.

**Chapter 7** looks at our Cambridge Global Perspectives® and Enterprise courses. These provide schools with an educational programme that is particularly supportive of developing the learner attributes.