1: Introduction

1.1 Audience, aim, purpose and focus of the guide

Many books and articles have been written about improvement in schools and school systems over the past two decades. This has been a period of intense international interest in educational quality and standards. Today, we are in a position where there is a wealth of theory and research evidence about what makes an effective school and a quality education. This material is not always easily available to school leaders and teachers in a practical and coherent form. This Cambridge guide is designed to meet this need for schools that:

- provide one or more of the Cambridge curriculum programmes for their learners
- aspire to achieve a high standard of education for these learners
- are committed to the ongoing process of school development.

This guide will help school leaders and teachers to understand, and put into practice in their own context, some of the important lessons learned from international work on raising quality standards and improving educational outcomes. It is designed to complement other Cambridge resources for school leaders and teachers including *Implementing the Curriculum with Cambridge* and *Developing the Cambridge Learner Attributes* . Find them at **www.cambridgeinternational.org.uk/teaching-and-learning**

The primary audience for the guide is schools that are newly registered with Cambridge International. Providing one or more Cambridge programmes often involves significant transformation, with new and different approaches. The guide supports the development work that schools will already have undertaken to register with Cambridge International and to plan for introducing one or more Cambridge programmes. Newly registered schools are likely to be 'working towards' the achievement of at least some of the Cambridge standards, which is recognised in the registration process. The development work covered in the guide will enable the school to achieve these standards and then continue to develop to become an even better school.

The guide will also be of interest to schools going through the registration process, and to well-established schools that have achieved the Cambridge registration standards. School development is a journey, and one of the characteristics of outstanding schools and school systems is that they are always striving for further improvements.

The timescale of activity in the guide covers a period of 3–5 years. This will vary depending on what processes you have already put in place and the outcomes achieved in the school. As school development is a never-ending cycle of evaluation and improvement, the activities will relate closely to ongoing cycles of implementation, monitoring, review and revision well into the future.

The **aim** of the guide is to provide an introduction to school development that improves the delivery of Cambridge programmes and thereby supports student learning.

The **purpose** of the guide is to be a user-friendly and practical manual for Cambridge schools in a wide range of contexts. As well as providing some guidance about effective practice, it will also direct users to additional reading on key topics so that schools can access the research evidence directly. It will introduce, but not fully explore, further steps that more experienced schools could take towards achieving sustainable excellence.

The **focus** of the guide is on improving the quality of student learning. This includes:

- a classroom focus on the quality of learning for individual students
- a broader focus on improving the quality of student learning – through developing a school-wide culture of learning supported by a shared educational vision and the systems and processes necessary to achieve and sustain it.

1.2 Resources

This guide contains a limited selection of examples. We are developing further examples of criteria, policies, procedures, documents and approaches described in this guide. When available these resources will be published on our public website. It is very important to stress that these resources are provided to help your planning. You must develop your own procedures and practices in line with your school community's needs.

An annotated bibliography is provided at the end of the guide. Terms used in the guide are defined in the glossary section.

1.3 The challenge of professional and institutional change

Change is, by its nature, disruptive as it involves challenging traditional attitudes and practices to improve and broaden the range of professional skills. School development involves evaluating and refining existing practices and introducing new ones, all supported by professional learning. For teachers this is likely to include developing a broader range of effective teaching practices that support active learning. For school managers and leaders this might include developing new leadership styles and strategies. Introducing change is only the beginning of the process as effective change requires ongoing evaluation and development.

This guide provides some guidance to help schools design their own development plans. How change is managed will depend on the context and culture of the school. While research into school improvement has some generalisable findings, it is important to recognise that every school is unique, with its own context and culture. As Kamens (2013, p.130) points out:

 "It should be clear that the search for 'best practices', is now an international one. With it come high expectations that there are easily borrowed protocols that can vastly improve local educational systems … The search for best practice is built on an optimistic faith that 'a school is a school is a school.' It assumes that a practice that works in say Finland will work as well in the United States or Germany. It assumes Education is like Engineering."

The richness of the Cambridge community is its diversity, and we do not believe that education is like engineering. Every school has its own distinctive mission and community, and every class of learners its own character and needs. School development is also a gradual process. Planning needs to move incrementally through stages, recognising the current practical reality the school faces. This guide is not intended in any way to be prescriptive. School leaders and teachers will want to consider the ideas and practices presented here critically. They can then apply them in ways that fit their own unique context, circumstances and needs.

1.4 What are 'standards' in an education system supported by Cambridge International?

It is helpful to have a common understanding of what we mean by 'standards' in the context of Cambridge programmes, our international family of schools and the processes of school development. Standards are clear descriptions used to define quality expectations. In education they often refer to student achievement but they also relate to quality across the whole of a school's work and functions.

The international qualification standard

As we are a curriculum and assessment authority and awarding organisation, Cambridge standards relate to the prescribed syllabus and its assessment. Cambridge International can justifiably claim to set an international standard for its qualifications. At Cambridge Upper Secondary and Advanced levels our qualifications are widely recognised by higher education institutions, universities, employers and other stakeholders as excellent preparation for the next stage of education. Because these standards are international and portable, a student receiving a grade in one country at one time can accurately be compared to a student receiving the same grade at another time and place. Cambridge International is responsible for maintaining these standards and ensuring they are the same for all students in all Cambridge schools.

Our international standard is a combination of three different types of standard. We set and maintain standards defined by our qualifications.

1. **Curriculum standard:** This standard relates to the explicit and implicit demand of the content and skills set out in our syllabuses. The syllabuses and their specifications provide an appropriate selection of material for the age group at an appropriate level of difficulty.

2. **Assessment standard** (also called the attainment standard): This standard relates to the demand of the assessments we set. What students know and can do is measured through assessment processes that are valid, reliable and fair. This means that results students receive are seen as accurate measures of their performance in relation to the particular subjects being assessed.

3. **Grading standard** (also called awarding standard): This standard relates to the achievement we recognise via our grade threshold decisions. Students are awarded a mark/grade accurately reflecting their level of performance.

Maintaining confidence in these standards is fundamental to our operation. We have very strict regulations universally applied to all our schools relating to all areas that might compromise this standard. All of our examination procedures and grade awarding practices, coursework and security regulations are designed to maintain this high level of confidence in our qualifications.

One immediate challenge for new schools is to develop a clear understanding of these Cambridge standards. Only then will they be able to communicate them to learners, parents and other stakeholders. This is obviously important for teachers and leaders in planning, providing, monitoring and assessing the educational programme. It is equally important that learners are helped to develop their own understanding of the standards and what they can do to improve their own achievement.

School standards
There are three other domains of education standard (Faubert 2009) that are particularly relevant to this guide:

- standards related to processes at classroom level
- standards related to processes at school level
- standards related to the school environment.

These three types of standard support the school's achievement of the primary aim: a high standard of educational achievement for all learners. Cambridge International's registration quality standards fit within this category of supporting standards. They set out and exemplify an initial benchmark of quality that schools need to commit to in order to implement successful Cambridge programmes. Because we recognise and value the diversity of schools in the Cambridge family, and the differences in the contexts in which the schools operate, we have not set out further, more aspirational and detailed standards to guide the process of school development. We believe that schools are best placed to determine their own ongoing quality standards, related to their own circumstances and the needs of their learners and communities.

National or state governments are likely to be responsible for determining these standards, as national standards form the basis for evaluation of school quality in the public sector. If national standards are not sufficient for delivering Cambridge qualifications, the school will need to develop and implement their own. In private schools the governing body and/or owner, as well as the senior management, will be responsible for determining these school-based standards. Internationally many schools seek accreditation with one or more accreditation bodies, which publish their own sets of accreditation standards. These are wide-ranging definitions of quality across the whole of a school's work and functions, and are focused both on quality assurance and on promoting improvement. Schools that are considering applying for international accreditation will find this guide very useful, as the principles and practices outlined are consistent with best international practice.

1.5 Curriculum alignment and coherence

While Cambridge International defines the curriculum and assessment standard, schools are responsible for developing standards related to processes at classroom level and those related to processes at school level that will influence student learning. Aligning what is prescribed and expected with what is actually taught and experienced by the student is one critical activity the school has to address. Because teaching happens locally, only schools can be responsible for ensuring that the taught and experienced curriculum is well aligned to Cambridge curriculum and assessment specifications. Furthermore, the Cambridge curriculum is not designed to be delivered in the same way in all classrooms around the world. While Cambridge International defines the standards, the approach to delivering the Cambridge programmes must be contextualised to optimise its value for the local context. Cambridge International provides teaching support material and exemplar materials but these need to be adapted for local needs.

Schools are a complex system of many interdependent parts. Changes in one area will have impacts on others, so a key concept in school development is coherence. Changes should be aligned and designed to pull in the same direction. The direction will be determined by the mission and values of the school. However, one common value for all Cambridge schools must be improving the quality of student learning and preparing students properly for Cambridge qualifications. A school provides a coherent education when the written, taught, assessed and experienced curricula align, and school practices, incentives and written resources (including textbooks) support the curriculum.

1.6 Leadership and management

Both leadership and management are critical to school development. A useful, if simple, distinction relates management functions to effective operations, making sure that the school is running well. Leadership is focused on the direction the school is going in, ensuring it is doing the right things, has a vision and mission that is inspiring teaching and learning, and improving the school's performance in relation to this. Leadership is also concerned with getting the most out of individuals and developing a collaborative culture.

Within the administrative team of a school different management responsibilities will be assigned to different individuals. Often leadership is also viewed in terms of a position – the principal or director. The principal of a school is responsible for making sure that teaching and learning is effective. It is, however, useful to view leadership as a process rather than just a position of authority. Leadership of school development demands a complex set of skills and qualities. This will be a mixture of expertise and abilities best found in a team or a network of leaders. Each individual leader will bring their own set of skills and attributes to the group. These will combine with those of others to make a powerful whole. Discovering, inspiring, motivating and developing this network of leaders of learning is one of the most demanding but rewarding roles of a school principal. In busy schools too much attention can be given to administration, focusing on managing the day-to-day operations, and not enough on leading learning.

International research demonstrates that leaders make a difference to schools. In a review of the impact of school leadership on learner outcomes, Robinson (2007) grouped leadership dimensions into five main categories:

- establishing goals and expectations
- strategic resourcing
- planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum
- promoting and participating in teacher learning and development
- ensuring an orderly and supportive environment.

In her analysis of the effect of each of these on learner outcomes, based on a review of a number of studies, she found that what leaders (in this case primarily referring to principals) do is very important. The more leadership is focused on teaching and learning and the professional development of teachers, the greater the effect on student outcomes. The largest impact was the result of leaders promoting and participating in teacher learning and development. The second was planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum.

While school development should have a particular focus on classroom change, it is much more than that because classrooms do not operate in a vacuum. Developing a culture of learning across the whole school community is important. The school climate has a profound effect on attitudes and approaches to learning. Where appropriate, empowering and involving teachers, students, parents and the broader community will help generate a collective sense of responsibility for school development.

The following chapters are designed to help school leaders (broadly defined) to build the skills and knowledge necessary for improving the success of learners. The focus is on developing those areas that have the greatest impact on learner, and therefore school outcomes. These are the two dimensions of leadership identified by Robinson as:

- promoting and participating in teacher learning and development
- planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum.

We also briefly consider other important related areas.

1.7 What do we mean by 'evaluation'?

We use the term 'evaluation' in several contexts in this guide. Evaluation is associated with two different types of judgement which need to be distinguished:

- judgement with a view to hold to account
- judgement with a view to improve.

Throughout this guide the term 'evaluation' is used in terms of judgement with a view to improve. Cambridge schools will be operating under very different circumstances, and standards and expectations will be largely based on the school's context. This will give rise to different judgements required to hold to account. Beyond establishing that all Cambridge recognition standards are met and maintained, holding schools to account is not Cambridge International's concern. As this is a guide for school development, making accurate and valid judgements with a view to improvement is absolutely central. The purpose of judgement is to bring about change that will better support student learning.

One example of this distinction applies in Chapter 6, which considers evaluating teaching. Some schools and school systems will require teacher evaluation also to be teacher appraisal, where the teacher is held to account. Performance review in this situation might, for example, impact on salary. Schools may or may not have a choice over this. What matters in the context of this guide is that teaching improves as a result of the evaluation process.

The same principle applies to Chapter 2, which considers school development planning. Many state systems apply school accountability measures where evaluation is about holding the school to account. In the context of this guide our concern is the process used, data gathered, judgements made and plans to implement that result in better practice.