



## Ireland

Batt O'Keeffe T.D  
**Minister of Education**



*Batt O'Keeffe T.D. has been the Minister for Education and Science, Ireland since May 2008. Minister O'Keeffe is a former Lecturer and holds a BA, Hdip in Education. He is a member of the Fianna Fáil political party. In addition to his current role, Minister O'Keeffe has previously served as, Minister of State - Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, with special responsibility for Environmental Protection and for Housing and Urban Renewal. He has been a member of the Oireachtas, the Irish Parliament since 1987. Minister O'Keeffe has also been a Member of Cork County Council, Higher Education Committee, Chairman of Southern Health Board, Member of Association of Health Boards as well as Spokesperson on Finance and Transport & Communications.*

### **Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future**

I wish to commend and congratulate UNESCO's International Bureau of Education for providing a timely and important focus on Inclusive Education at this time. I would like to share some thoughts based on our policies and experiences in Ireland.

One of the core aims of my Department is to "support and improve the quality, relevance and inclusiveness of education for every learner in our schools» In order to achieve this inclusivity we must:

- ensure that no one is excluded because of: ability or gender, marital status, family status, age, disability, race, sexual orientation, religious belief or membership of the Traveller community;
- strive to maximise the participation of all students not only in primary and post-primary education but also maximise their progression into further and higher education;
- a continued focus on the learner and the needs of the learner, and not just access systems;
- ensure that access means more than 'entry' to a course of education or a learning programme. Supports and guidance are also needed to help learners successfully participate in learning and are key to making opportunities 'accessible'. The focus should not just be on 'access' but also on 'participation' and 'outcomes';
- be aware that learning is lifelong and is concerned with all phases and forms of learning (formal, informal and non-formal) from pre-school to post-retirement. The lifelong learning concept incorporates the mutually supporting objectives of personal fulfilment, democratic participation, social inclusion, adaptability, employability and re-entry to education at any point throughout the person's life;
- be aware that in addressing the issue of access to education and learning, participation and outcomes, the broader social context needs to be borne in mind: access to decision making; diversity and accommodating diversity; economic resources and their interplay with outcomes;



- ensure that in addition to 'top-down' initiatives that there continue to be a variety of regional and local initiatives to improve access and combat educational disadvantage;
- make learning more relevant and meaningful for all, particularly those students who are vulnerable to exclusion;
- ensure that our curricula, policies and practices are responsive to managing inclusivity and diversity in our schools and other places of learning;
- the key principles of access, inclusion and early intervention underpin the early childhood education measure, the literacy and numeracy measures and those for tackling early school leaving being adopted under Ireland's action plan for educational inclusion: "Delivering Educational Opportunity in Schools. This plan represents a shift in emphasis away from individual initiatives, each addressing a particular aspect of the problem and adopts a multi-faceted and more integrated approach.

Ireland's social partnership agreement, its National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-16 and the social inclusion chapter of the National Development Plan 2007 - 2013 adopt a lifecycle approach in addressing issues of social and educational exclusion. What is of particular significance about these plans is their longer term perspective, the setting of realistic high-level goals, their focus on the lifecycle and on coherent and integrated responses that can be effectively monitored.

Ireland has made considerable progress in increasing the numbers of students completing second level and progressing to further and higher education either after school or later on in life. Ireland entry rates to higher education are now in excess of 55 per cent (of 17-18 year olds) compared to 20% in 1980, indicating that the combined investment of resources and measures at all levels of the education system is having a substantial impact. New and challenging targets for increased access to higher education have been recently set in a six year National Access Plan for the period 2008-2013. These will bring us closer to a more inclusive society with a sustained focus on improving equality of opportunity and reducing poverty.

In recent years, Ireland has become a country of immigration. Immigrants are very welcome and have made a valuable contribution to Irish society. Some immigrants may not speak the English language, others may not be fully proficient in the language. This presents new challenges in the context of inclusive education. The education system plays a major role in facilitating the integration of immigrants into Irish society. At primary and post-primary, priority has been given to enabling young immigrants to learn English. There are now almost 2,000 English Language Support Teachers in our schools, up from 260 in 2001/2002. English classes are also provided for approximately 13,000 adult migrants through our national network of Vocational Education Committees.

In addition, schools have also been provided with resource materials including Guidelines for School on Intercultural Education, a Primary School Assessment Kit and a Toolkit for Diversity in Primary School - Together Towards Inclusion. The latter document was a joint north south project and this Toolkit was sent to every primary school in this island earlier this year.

The policies, principles and actions I have outlined are, in my view, crucial elements to contributing to UNESCO's long-standing aim of Education for All.

I would like to offer my best wishes for a successful conference which I am sure will make an important contribution to the promotion of inclusive education.