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## Protection for the non-academic student

MOST people's image of the educational system is of a pyramid structure, with a broad base up to the age of about 16 and then a progressively narrowing superstructure as more and more students peel off into employment, until the giddy and narrow heights of the doctorate are reached. In a recent report the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) asks some profound questions about the suitability of this structure for the present day (*Selection and Certification in Education and Employment*, OECD, 2 rue André-Pascal, Paris). One of the most interesting questions concerns the so-called terminal/transfer dilemma, and has a particular relevance in a period when secondary schools are being required to accept children of a very wide range of abilities into so-called comprehensive education.

The OECD points out that such schools have to combine two functions previously fulfilled on separate tracks: that of preparing students to leave the educational system for employment, and that of training and most often selecting students for transfer to the next higher level. In practically all cases, claims the OECD, the result of this uneasy merger is that curricula and assessment practices are geared primarily to meet the needs of those who will move up, even if this number is actually a minority. The higher levels of the pyramid exert a strong influence on those beneath. It might be added that in many universities the same pattern exists for the sciences: the need to select and

train the postgraduate unduly influences the undergraduate curriculum.

At the secondary level of education the move towards comprehensive schools has clearly been seen by its proponents as a move towards greater equality of opportunity and freedom to find one's own level. If however, comprehensive schools develop in the way that the OECD describes, they will only tend to emphasise failure. Those for whom such a school was never other than their last base before getting a job will find themselves poor relations alongside those with obvious university aspirations who are catered for by examinations and school curricula with the word 'university' written all over them.

If the so-called holistic structure of an educational system acts to the disadvantage of those with 'mere' manual and technical skills, does the alternative 'aggregative' model, with tertiary education pursued in a much more diverse way, work any better? Certainly it could help to break a narrow academic grip on schools, but maybe at the high cost of fragmented tertiary courses, much poorer staff-student relationships and a general lack of direction in many students' development.

Is there a middle path, that maintains the best of academic traditions without casting out the non-academic student into outer darkness? We must find an answer in the next few years; the OECD report could be a valuable basis for discussion. □

## Read all about something like it

"MANY killed in earthquake . . . where's the pun in that?" a sub-editor on *The Guardian* is supposed, in newspaper mythology, to have said whilst appraising headlines. 'Buy now while stocks last' ran the headline to a leader in *The Guardian* last Saturday; true to form the content of the leader was not about declining resources or exceptional bargains—it was another little poke at the quaint language that specialists use. Only a few weeks ago *The Guardian* was pointing out the intelligibility of *New Society* as opposed to the opacity of *New Scientist* and *Nature*. Now it returns to the fray to renounce its faith even in the accessibility of the social sciences on the basis of an advertisement in *New Society* for a book *An Eclectic Approach to Primal Integration*, and it snips a highly technical sentence on adenylate cyclase out of last week's *New Scientist* to reassure readers that we scientists are still at it.

No doubt our colleagues on the *New Scientist* know how to defend themselves against these outrages, but for our part we simply say that at least our customers know what they are getting. Anyone who picks up an article

entitled 'Analgesic activity of lipotropic C fragment depends on carboxyl terminal tetrapeptide' can be under no illusions about what they are in for, whereas readers of *The Guardian* may have to search for a serious article on Indian corruption under a heading such as 'Currying Favour'. Nor is ambiguity restricted to *The Guardian*. Every evening as we walk wearily from office to station we are assailed by placards for the evening newspapers proclaiming 'London-bound train crashes', only to discover that a freight train from Glasgow has run off the rails outside Preston.

Our enthusiasm for this theme of misrepresentation having been raised, we were just about to go on in the same vein to wonder how many horticulturalists had bought John Betjeman's *A Few Late Chrysanthemums* by mistake, how many glaciologists Margaret Drabble's *The Ice Age* and so on when an uneasy feeling crept over us. After all in the office we do get a steady stream of offers of wildlife pictures. And we get the occasional phone call asking if we have the address of the World Nudist Federation. □