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The debate as to whether the new Diplomas to be introduced from this September should or shouldn't replace the current mixed bag of qualifications available to 14 to 19-year-olds will no doubt heat up over the coming months.

Quite whether these Diplomas will become "the qualification of choice" for teenagers in England's schools and colleges as predicted by the government remains to be seen. Designed to combine academic and applied learning, there is arguably a place for such qualifications particularly given the plea by employers for school and college leavers to be better equipped to cope with the working environment.

The acid test, however, lies in whether universities, business and industry will be convinced of the worth of these new qualifications. The government's grand plan could go horribly wrong if the Diplomas are viewed as 'second-best'. Worse still, it could jeopardise the future of thousands of students.

The main challenge for the consortia of learning providers involved in the initial roll-out of the new qualifications will be how to deliver the Diplomas whilst at the same time continuing to offer their students A Level and GCSE courses. The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) has voiced its support for the Diplomas in principle but is still seeking much more clarity from ministers over the new qualification. A further challenge lies in how to build in the work experience element of the new qualification. Concerns have been raised about whether there will be enough willing employers to offer placements to students particularly given the requirement for CRB checks.

Assuming the issues raised above can be resolved, then there is the practical problem of how schools, colleges and employers are going to collaborate effectively to monitor student progress. Here lies the rub. There appears to be a glaring gap in the volumes of material published on the Diplomas to date: given that the qualifications have been fashioned by employers as well as educationalists, how are they going to effectively monitor the academic, practical and pastoral performance of the students undertaking a Diploma?

Monitoring both the academic performance and behaviours of students is a pivotal role for every educational institution allowing the quick identification of issues and effective intervention. As the growing emphasis on the personalisation of learning has added to the challenge, so does the introduction of the new diplomas in terms of tracking and assessing a student's progress against their goals particularly given the work place element of the new courses.

Performance monitoring is clearly not new to the world of business and trade, and it is likely that those employers involved in the roll-out of the first five Diplomas will have their own systems in place. But the question begs to be asked as to whether they are really geared up to monitor student performance against their own personal learning goals.

Perhaps more worrying is the ability of schools and colleges to track student progress. Many are still reliant on paper based performance monitoring systems or excel spreadsheets. Despite personal online learning space being a priority for reform set by the State, Becta research revealed that a mere 27% of further education colleges had electronic management information systems in place to maintain records of student achievement.

I would question whether the Diplomas will fall a long way short of achieving the government's aims unless employer, educational institution and student all have access to a secure online learning space where course work and resources can be stored.

The risks of not utilising the raft of technology available, in my view, are many and significant.

Security of information is one key area to consider. Clearly it is all too easy for paper-based files to get lost, damaged or destroyed – particularly if they are being carted from one location to another. Equally, computer discs offer no real guarantee either despite the few simple steps that can be taken to encrypt CDs. The government has not exactly been exemplary in its approach to security of data as the recent HM Revenue & Customs debacle demonstrated. Equally the world of business has suffered its fair share of embarrassment in this quarter. Only last month, the HSBC banking group lost an unencrypted computer disc containing the details of 370,000 customers.

Web-based electronic individual learning plans (ILP) applications provide a secure environment controlled and possibly hosted by the school or college, allowing them to grant the appropriate level of access to the areas of information relevant to students, parents, teachers and employers alike. For example, eTracker provides a snapshot of how a student is progressing against targets set, which can be easily interpreted by students, teachers and employers. The data graphically encompasses not only assessment performance but also disciplinary and behavioural issues, SMART targets and even allows students to set

their own targets. ILP applications can easily be extended to enable teachers and students to set the goals for the work place element of the Diploma in addition to the criterion associated with achieving the academic level required. As a web-based tool, access can be granted to the employers to view student progress without compromising security of data about the student or their performance in other qualifications.

Another key advantage lies in the quick identification of any issues that a student is facing. Drop off in performance or changes in behaviour often indicate a wider issue – family, health or even fiscal problems for example. Early identification facilitates an early resolution before the issue becomes a real problem. This could be particularly relevant in the work placement. Students will be out of their normal environment and some may struggle. eTracker, for example, allows teaching staff to raise a Cause for Concern about a student which is emailed to all the key people associated with that student, allowing swift follow up and remedial action. Giving the employer the same ability could help the student both enjoy their work experience as well achieve the criterion required of the Diploma they are studying.

An ILP application can also make a significant contribution in terms of reducing the increased administrative burden faced by schools and colleges of providing the new Diplomas alongside existing qualifications. They pull in data from a school or college's CIS database, negating the need for huge swathes of paper and making it far easier for the teaching staff to keep track of assignments and maintain an overview of student no matter how many different types of qualifications they're studying.

A good ILP solution will make the onerous task of tracking student performance against their personal targets simple and easy. It should reduce administrative workload, not add to it: if it doesn't make life easier for everyone involved, then it is liable to fail. This is as important for teachers and students as it is for the employers. I believe that it will be essential to the success of the vocational training element that tracking student's performance is a painless process that does not absorb great chunks of time for all concerned.

Clearly the stakes are high. While some may disagree with the introduction of the Diplomas and others remain concerned as to how they will work in reality, it is in the interests of the thousands of students about to embark on this new qualification to ensure that they are successful – and the appropriate use of technology will play a vital support role to that success.