

Law, Legal Education and the Rise of the Robolawyers

Most of us would agree with the themes of this conference: that the rule of law is essential, both for nations and for citizens; that public officials serve a special function in ensuring that law protects rights; and that law schools should continue to shape legal practitioners as knowledgeable and responsible agents, offering the study of issues that surround the practice of law and its implementation across jurisdictions.

Increasingly, however, our understandings of law schools, law students and the legal profession itself are challenged by technological development. We hear much in the media, for instance, about the 'future of work'. These reports predict that law is one of the professions destined to disappear as artificial intelligence and so-called 'robo-lawyers' advance. Certainly, technology is having a profound impact on the ways in which law is practiced and is already impacting structurally on the profession. Already, some law firms are investing in artificial intelligence, rather than human capital. In turn, universities – and thus law schools - are themselves undergoing significant stress as digital disruption impacts on the tertiary sector. And for students, technological developments mean that the ways in which they learn law are changing rapidly. In parallel to the robo-lawyers, we are seeing the rise of robotutors.

While many resist the predictions of the advance of the robo-lawyers as overblown, and, indeed, a kind of moral panic, the robo-lawyers and their friends are already with us. Resistance it seems is, indeed, futile. But what does this mean for the future of legal education? Can law schools continue to fulfil our wider aspirations relating to the rule of law, the formation of knowledgeable, responsible and ethical lawyers, and offer a curriculum that encourages an understanding of law in its wider context? Or will digital disruption and the march of the robots lead us down an altogether different, and perhaps darker, path?