AI

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: A SMART CAREER CHOICE

By Wenjuan Zhang

LAST November, I flew to Beijing for conference and winter break. Being away for half a year, I found the city had become very unfamiliar. I even had a very embarrassing experience. I forgot my smart phone at home. Without it I even couldn’t get a taxi on the morning of the working day. Nobody uses cash but scan through a smartphone. The online technology makes sharing economy practical and attractive. People scan the barcode and use the sharing bicycle from the metro station to their home which is cheap, convenient and green. Robot designing becomes a popular extracurricular among kids at primary schools. More surprisingly, AI and its impact suddenly becomes a hot topic among Chinese daily conversation. Universities especially law schools establish research centers focused on the immerging issues caused by new technology. Lawyers and employees from different fields start talking about the impact of AI on their future. More and more factories and supermarkets are using AI to perform which causes layoff or as a response to the labor shortage. Senior persons from rural areas learning the use of smartphone for not being too marginalized in the new era.

In India, the impact of technology in daily life has not been that evident. Neither is the debate and discussion on the impact of AI so pervasive. But it is coming soon. In 2014, when I landed in India all the local taxi drivers were using the non-smart Nokia phone. None of them knew how to use GPS. Three years later, they all use smart phones. More than half of them use GPS for figuring out the best traffic way.

Education cannot and shall not be separated from these daily changes. In early February this year, The Asian Universities Summit held in Shenzhen, China had the keynote address by Dr Subra Suresh, President of Nanyang Technological University, Former Director of the US National Science Foundation (NSF). Dr Suresh raised several far-sighted critical questions, such as “what does it mean to be an ‘educated person’ in 21st Century?” “What does it mean to be human in 21st Century?” “Environmental sustainability with 10 billion people?” At the end, he also emphasized a tough challenge that is “Technology developing faster than society’s ability to comprehend its intended benefits and unintended consequences”. Nobody has the answer so far.

It is the social responsibility of universities to respond to the challenge. For example, education of social science and humanities should be strengthened and expanded to respond to the unintended consequence of the new technology. One more practical implication for universities is their students’ career development. While AI or other new technology could create job opportunities they could also remove job opportunities. It is necessary for universities to think about producing graduates competitive in job market at least not easily replaced by
AI and other new technology. In order to achieve this, two things have got wide consensus among high education policy makers and practitioners that is to build multidisciplinary knowledge and comprehensive skill of problem solving. Multi-disciplinary exposure and training shall be a necessity. The traditional mindset of single discipline-based training will not be a good option any more. Multi-disciplinary knowledge is not enough. Higher education also need to empower young generation of solving messy problems. Taking the example of lawyer, for most of basic legal advice, AI can do much better than a young graduate from law school. For problems which can be decomposed easily, AI coffer service in a faster and cheaper way than an experienced lawyer. Only for ill-structured problems, AI has less competitive advantage to deal with. This is why we need to train our young generation on how to define, analyse and solve problems in a comprehensive and comprehensible way. In future, the lawyers’ competitive advantage is not to win the case but to solve the real problem in life.

As a faculty of a university and also as a mother of two kids who were born after 2010, my thinking about the implication of these changes on education is also beyond the role of universities. Command and control won’t and should not work well in the interaction with kids. Following instructions won’t be the comparative advantage of human beings in the AI era. Robots can be much better in executing orders. In this era, we need human beings to have independent thinking and creative problem solving skills. This should be addressed from family education, early education and primary education. It will be too late to leave it to the higher education. As parents, we need to cultivate the kids’ learning curiosity. Our communication with them shall be an interactive and evolving learning experience. They shall be encouraged to think independently and constructively. For schools, their curricular designing shall be discovery based and class management shall be more creative. Development of soft skills for family and schools has not got enough attention in many parts of India and China. Parents need qualification. Government has the responsibility to provide support, capacity building and also supervision to make sure kids are living under the qualified guardianship. Sad to say that there is still very little discussion on family education or parenting guidance here. In addition, trainings of teachers in primary and secondary schools has not been widely conducted. In many private schools, it is the combination of modern facility with old mindset of education.

We are in an era full of opportunities and challenges caused by new technology and globalization. Education should empower our kids to respond to the technological challenge but also responsible for producing decent human caring for the earth and future generations. The new vision for education calls attention from family education, to early child education, to primary education, to higher education and even to life education.

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Associate Professor, Jindal Global Law School and Executive Director, Center for India-China Studies