

The importance of soft skills in a digital world

by Brett Henebery 24 Jul 2019



Schools with parents and students who fear that the future workforce will be dominated by robots and artificial intelligence will be happy to hear the latest report by global accounting firm Deloitte Australia that humans still matter.

Head of curriculum at leading Queensland P-12 independent school, Matthew Flinders Anglican College on the Sunshine Coast, Bill Hooper, says school principals and lead educators can reassure their school communities with the positive news from Deloitte's latest report in its 'Building the Lucky Country' series.

The seventh edition in the series, entitled "The path to prosperity: Why the future of work is human", makes a compelling case that - despite the threat that technology poses to some sections of the workforce, particularly those involving routine and repetitive tasks - the future of work will be human.

“At Flinders, our students are accomplished learners and are committed to their academic goals,” Hooper said.

“However, it’s inevitable that some feel rattled by the debate that robots will take future jobs. Students are confiding that the hype about the impact of machines, algorithms and robots in the future workplace is complicating their Senior subject choices.”

Hooper said that while students worry that the job or industry they are striving for won’t be there when they graduate, it’s important that principals reassure them that it’s not all doom and gloom.

In fact, he said the news is “heartening”.

“Reports, like that of Deloitte’s, assert that robotics’ failing is that it is essentially limited to automation and augmentation of simple, manual tasks rather than creation, which is a skill that is intrinsically human,” Hooper said.

“For now, sentient computers like the deranged Hal 9000, Terminators and Blade Runners will, thankfully, remain the stuff of science fiction.”

Hooper noted that beyond the offer of solace to those anxious about the future of the workforce, the Deloitte report also offers some timely food for thought for Year 12’s currently submitting their preferences to QTAC and Year 10 students who are selecting their subjects for their Senior years of schooling.

“When thinking about the sustainability of a future career, we encourage our students to understand that it is the interpersonal and creative roles that will be hardest of all to mechanise,” he said.

“The Deloitte report reveals that jobs increasingly need us to use our hearts – the interpersonal and creative roles, with uniquely human skills like creativity, customer service, care for others, and collaboration that are the hardest to mechanise.”

Hooper said this is good news for students because these skills – often referred to as ‘soft’ skills – can be developed and strengthened to the point they become one’s personal character.

“And this is our mission here at Flinders: to develop in our students the character and competencies required to achieve academic excellence and the confidence to contribute to a successful future in a fast-changing and information-rich world,” he said.

In the report, Deloitte Access Economics partner, David Rumbans, backs up the importance of ‘soft’ skills with some interesting statistics;

- 86% of the jobs created between now and 2030 will be knowledge-worker jobs
- By 2030, 25% of Australia’s workforce will be professionals. Most of these will be in business services, health, education or engineering.
- 66% of jobs will be soft-skill intensive by 2030.

Hooper noted that “Rumbans’ description of these skills as ‘soft’ does not imply they are weak or easy to develop.

“Indeed, these skills are ‘hard’ skills to develop in young people; as hard as teaching algebra or grammar,” Hooper said.

“It’s also hard amidst the noise and potentially reductionist pressure of ATAR scores and NAPLAN results to find space within the curriculum to give these skills the prominence they deserve.”

It is for this reason why, in 2016, Matthew Flinders Anglican College adopted Michael Fullan’s distilment of 21st century skills into six Cs – Critical Thinking, Creativity, Communication, Character, Citizenship and Collaboration – as a focus for its P-12 curriculum.

“Our teachers were encouraged to make sense of them in the context of their own subjects because, for example, critical thinking rightly looks different in a maths class compared to a science class,” Hooper said.

One subject area at Flinders which has embraced the six Cs as the centrepiece of its curriculum and approach to teaching and learning is IDEAS (Innovation, Design, Engineering, Art and Science).

Introduced at the start of the 2019 academic year, IDEAS is a compulsory multi-disciplinary course in which Year 7 and 8 students employ a human-centred design process to find solutions to real-world problems.

“IDEAS is not just about making things; it’s about providing opportunities for a student to participate as a citizen of a community and develop their character through the experience,” Hooper said.

“It’s the perfect combination of academic rigour and personal development driven by values and, for our students, it captures the future-proofing shift that the Deloitte’s report is calling for: from hands...to heads...to hearts.”

Bill Hooper is Head of Curriculum at Matthew Flinders Anglican College