

The AI transition: what are the economic, social and ethical impacts?

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10:00am-4:00pm AEST

Engineers Australia Auditorium



Australian Academy of
Technological Sciences
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Artificial intelligence in all its forms is playing a growing role in the daily life of people and businesses around the country and the world. Following behind the advance of chat bots, large language models and new data processing tools are the questions about AI impacts on people, social structures and our relationship to information.

The AI transition - What are the economic, social and ethical impacts? event co-hosted by the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering's NSW Division and Engineers Australia sought to explore these questions and look into the opportunities and challenges of the current national AI transition.

Dr Cathy Foley AO FTSE FAA, ATSE President and Former Chief Scientist, opened the symposium before Scientia Professor Toby Walsh FTSE FAA, Chief Scientist at UNSW's AI Institute, delivered the keynote address. Professor Walsh reflected on the history of AI, noting that its widely recognised birth date, 18 June 1956, coincidentally falls on what is now known as International Panic Day. He highlighted AI's transformative potential across education and the workforce, while acknowledging coinciding and significant emerging societal challenges. These included the rapid pace of technological change, the need to rethink education and the future of work, growing concerns around misinformation and trust, and the increasing role of AI in high-consequence decision-making.

He encouraged attendees to consider AI through a historical lens and to draw parallels with previous technology revolutions whose benefits have ultimately been adopted, disseminated and shared globally. Lastly, Professor Walsh emphasised the message that Australia has an opportunity to shape the responsible development and deployment of AI as a global participant.

The ensuing panel sessions explored the technology underpinning Australia's AI revolution, industry perspectives on AI adoptions, its implications for national productivity and the legal, ethical and social issues that accompany its rapid development. develop the expertise and judgement required for complex problem solving.

The discussion explored the implications for education, including maintaining assessment integrity, strengthening AI literacy and ensuring graduates continue to develop critical thinking alongside increasing use of generative AI.



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The AI transition

Presented by ATSE NSW Division and Engineers Australia

Panel 1 AI Makers: The computers and infrastructure powering Australia's AI revolution

The first panel examined the computers and infrastructure that are making Australia's AI revolution possible. Panellists highlighted the significant investment required to support domestic AI capability, Australia's shortage of domestic AI compute and the growing importance of sovereign capability, noting that while Australia is attracting substantial investment in data centres, much of the underlying infrastructure remains foreign-owned. Improving access to compute for researchers and industry, alongside a coordinated national AI infrastructure strategy, will be critical to strengthening Australia's innovation ecosystem and long-term competitiveness.

Panel 2 Industry perspectives

This panel discussed the AI transition from an industry perspective. Discussions focused on governance, client relationships, productivity gains and integrating AI into business strategy. Panellists emphasised that governance should be viewed not simply as a compliance exercise but as a competitive advantage, enabling organisations to adopt AI responsibly while building trust. They also noted that while AI technologies continue to evolve at a rapid pace, governance frameworks and organisational capability must evolve alongside them.

Panel 3 Implications for productivity

Discussions continued with an examination of AI's potential to improve productivity across education and the workforce, including the need to carefully consider the most appropriate use cases for AI for each business. Panellists questioned whether today's productivity gains could come at the expense of future capability, noting that while AI enables less experienced workers to produce increasingly advanced outputs, it may also limit opportunities to develop the expertise and judgement required for complex problem solving. The discussion explored the implications for education, including maintaining assessment integrity, strengthening AI literacy and ensuring graduates continue to develop critical thinking alongside increasing use of generative AI.

Panel 4 Legal, ethical and social impacts

The final session of the day examined the domestic and international legal, ethical and social implications of AI, highlighting Australia's evolving policy landscape. Panellists noted that while existing privacy, anti-discrimination and consumer protection laws already apply to AI, fragmented responsibility and uncertainty around liability continue to create governance challenges. Discussion also focused on the National AI Plan, the growing role of international standards, and the emergence of independent AI auditing as mechanisms to support responsible AI adoption.

In wrapping up the day, panellists returned to several overarching themes, including the importance of ensuring the economic benefits of AI are shared broadly across society rather than contributing to growing income inequality. They highlighted Australia's opportunity to learn from international approaches to AI infrastructure and data centre development, arguing that strategic investment and policy settings will determine whether Australia benefits long-term from the AI boom or simply provides the physical infrastructure for overseas investors. The discussion reinforced that decisions made today on investment, sovereign capability and governance will shape Australia's ability to remain competitive while ensuring the benefits of AI are realised across the country.