LegalTech at UoM:
Establishing an Academic-Industry Consortium in Response to Sector Evolution

An Evolving Sector: How are Academic Institutions Adapting to the Evolution of LegalTech?

As innovation changes the way legal services are delivered, there is a significant knowledge gap in the sector and cultural shift required; here academic input can add great value.

Legal services providers increasingly need new areas of expertise, not previously seen within the legal profession, with legal engineers and data scientists now recruited alongside lawyers. This raises questions about whether universities are teaching the right mix of skills for law in the future and how the legal sector can collaborate better with academia to ensure our next generation of graduates are appropriately skilled.

The pace of change has been rapid with Forbes reporting that 2018 set a record 713% growth in investment in legal-tech start-ups, yet traditional law firms are struggling to keep pace with the technology & its application within existing business structures. That's why some firms sought academic expertise to help address the key challenges facing legal firms as ways of working become digitised and client expectations shift, and as the skillsets required in lawyers is evolving, universities need to adapt how law degrees are delivered.

Planning and Execution

The idea for the Manchester Law & Technology Initiative (MLaTI) arose in 2017, when we had begun to address this challenge via collaborative research and development projects with academic partners focussed on the development and application of tech-solutions. With a number of distinct projects already in place this generated wider questions around the implications of LegalTech within incumbent providers in the sector and the users of legal services; the university and partners were interested to develop a project to address these key questions and challenges collaboratively.

The Business Engagement team liaised with colleagues across the university learning from similar consortium models used in different sectors that could be adapted to the particularities of LegalTech. From this a membership model funded by subscription fees was proposed, and the idea developed into a model addressing business need while providing a platform to deliver academically interesting insights.

Core to the success of the venture is the commitment of the business partners ensuring the Initiative is focussed on sector need rather than designed primarily from the academic perspective. Senior-level leadership was provided by Freshfields' Chief Legal Innovation Officer and the Managing Director of DWF's innovation and R&D subsidiary DWF Ventures, alongside senior academics from each of the three schools in the university. To ensure the project had the right blend of expertise, both the law firms contributed a diverse mix of specialists to work alongside the academics. This included experts in law, technology, data analytics, innovation, consulting and R&D.

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How Collaborative Research Projects at the University of Manchester Initiated a Unique Academic-Industry Consortium Carving New Territory for Legal Innovation

The University's Business Engagement team identified an appetite among law firms to explore the impacts of increasing digitisation of legal services in a collective manner, while within the university a network of researchers across Law, Business and Computer Science with relevant research interests was emerging. These have been brought together in first of its type academic-industry consortium working to collectively identify and address some of the key questions emerging within the sector.

Formally combining the expertise of leading law firms with academic expertise of multiple disciplines inside a globally-renowned university, MLaTI has a dedicated aim to publish research and create curriculum content that is focused purely on the successful use of technology in the legal sector. The model seeks to address the needs of business partners while delivering academically-interesting insight and feeding into teaching, in accordance with the University's core goals of excellence in research and teaching.

Areas of focus include business structures, culture and decision-making as well as more technical issues such as data standardisation. Ensuring the next generation is equipped with skills traversing law and technology is paramount for law firms to compete in the digital age, which raises questions about whether universities are teaching future lawyers the right skills. Law firms are keen to collaborate with academia to ensure our next generation of graduates is appropriately skilled.

Objectives of the Initiative

The initiative's core objective is to further the knowledge base around tech-enabled delivery of legal services, investigate how the growth of technology is impacting the legal sector and successful applications of LegalTech, and to learn from other sectors that have experienced disruption and innovation. It is intended that the alliance becomes a leading voice of expertise in the fast evolving LegalTech space and act as a platform to develop world-leading teaching in this area.

The University worked with founding partners Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer and DWF Ventures to establish a first of its type academic-industry alliance, to formally combine the expertise of leading law firms with the combined academic expertise of individual schools inside a globally renowned university.

The Initiative focusses on:

- Developing future skills.
- Training needs and curriculum development.
- Organisational behavioural factors in the adoption of new legal technologies.

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- Developing and evaluating new technologies.
- Creating long-term research partnerships.

Impacts to Date

Collaboration between law firms and academic institutions has been notoriously difficult in the past; but MLaTI is setting a new standard, as a first of its kind model, and has received endorsement from government ministers, The Law Society and Ministry of Justice LegalTech Delivery Panel for its innovative approach to addressing business challenges and consumer impacts arising from application of new technologies in legal services.

A Ministry of Justice spokesman formally launched the Initiative in 2018 and the MoJ LegalTech Delivery Panel Chair has undertaken a fellowship with the University to support and promote the work of the Initiative.

Since launch, new members have joined ensuring a broader perspective across different segments of the legal market. New members are legal firms, Weightmans, Addleshaw Goddard, Fletchers Solicitors, Jackson Lees, CFG Law, plus the barrister chambers St Johns Buildings, ensuring a broader perspective across the different segments of the legal market.

Impacts will ultimately be measured by the value of curriculum changes and quality of research output, the initiative has already featured:

- Subject-matter experts from law firms delivering lectures
- New project module and LegalTech certificate, with full curriculum review delivering a Law with Technology course for 2020
- Part-time legal engineering roles and opportunities to complete research projects with member firms, for current undergraduate students developed with legal-tech business SYKE
- Three work-streams initiated with intention to build into large collaborative partnerships positioned to bid for major funding streams including ISCF
- Opportunities for students to complete research projects for member firms as part of their research modules
- Sponsorship of the Manchester Legal Tech Meetup and the Global Legal Hackathon
- Recruitment of a full-time researcher dedicated to MLaTI projects
- In 2020 we launched a podcast series featuring speakers from across the Initiative membership and beyond.

Impact on Teaching

The University is not only laying new ground by working with business partners in this area but also combining the capabilities of its law, business and computer science schools for the first time.

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Access to this combination of academic expertise appeals to both corporate members and students. A significant impact is the introduction of a teaching module on Legal Technology, which received 100% positive feedback from students:

- *"This has opened my eyes and showed me an area I didn't know existing but is fascinating, it has made me more confident about my future.*
- *"The most positive experience was having real world contacts and working on real life apps."*
- *"I would tell [prospective students] that it will be a life changing course"*

The course, originally titled 'Legal Tech and Access to Justice', allowed 20 third year undergraduate students to design and build legal apps that were later licensed to non-profit clients. The course then expanded the following year to include Master/LLM level students from the law school. In 2020-2021, the course revised its content, reflected in the title of the course, Law, Money and Technology, which runs during the spring term. The course is an active collaboration with a range of participants and stakeholders, and we anticipate the course continuing to evolve in the 2021-2022 academic year.

Stuart Whittle, Director of Innovation at consortium member Weightmans, said: "We are proud of the developments we have made in the innovation sphere… This work would be impossible without collaboration with digital specialists, underpinned by academic precision – our innovation strategy is grounded in academic theory, which is why it is so important for us to continue to invest in initiatives such as this Initiative. This blend of expertise and insight has enabled us to deliver new ways of working which will not just equip us for the future of legal services but allow us to shape it."

The course is shifting how the University trains the next generation workforce, with the focus on 1) experimentation how academics/non-academic experts collaborate, 2) identifying the emerging hybrid and existing skills needed in the context of digital transformations to legal services, 3) considering these industry facing needs in relation to background institutional rules and political-social dynamics, and 4) creating concrete hands-on experiences for students to develop their skill capacities and to facilitate a 'talent academy' for prospective employers. We think of this broadly as rethinking the way we collaborate between diverse expert communities to design the next generation professional - or, more simply, what it means to incorporate 'hybrid' skills into the curriculum.

Future Plans

In 2020 we engaged Ministry of Justice LegalTech Delivery Panel Chair Christina Blacklaws to work with us undertaking a strategic review of the Initiative and its potential impact and value on the UK Legal sector.

Following this the Initiative has plans to:

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- Launch a tiered Partner/Member structure allowing a lower level of access to a broader range of organisation, while retaining a committed core of partner businesses setting the strategic direction for the Initiative, along with the University.
- Work more strategically with organisations that can support and promote the work of the Initiative including the Law Society of England & Wales, The Solicitors Regulation Authority, and Tech Nation.
- Submit a major funding grant to support an international study into the shifting skills requirements in large law firms and map against how major law schools are adapting.

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Appendix. Diving Deeper into Teaching: A Narrative Account

The new module on the course, 'Law Money and Technology' and its current direction moving forward is building directly on this collaboration, with regular sessions between participants to brainstorm ideas and reflect on our efforts in the classroom. Three cohorts are involved in this development. First, external non-academic stakeholder a) co-deliver class sessions, b) where each session blends lecture, conversation and hand-on simulated real world experience, and c) that addresses discrete aspects of legal services and regulation in relation to digital technology. The stakeholders come from a range of industries and regulatory contexts and represent diverse roles: legal innovation teams, management consultancy, computer scientists, barristers and solicitors, case management, document automation, and so forth. The external stakeholders meet in advance and after their respective sessions, and also as the entire group to discuss lessons and brainstorm new ways to integrate respective sessions into a standardised but 'living' curriculum.

Second, academic colleagues within the University of Manchester and in universities across Europe, North America and the UK contribute on the course, in terms of both design and delivery. The academics meet together and occasionally with the other external stakeholders. The ongoing conversation is part of a developing set of collaborations - from reading groups to various industry, academic events, and collaborative scholarship - all of which further inform the curriculum delivery. In addition, external regulatory and industry stakeholders have the opportunity to draw upon insights from academics. For instance, we currently are finalising a large ESRC grant application that would seek to identify and standardise the core professional competencies required in this field, with an explicit focus on training, which is itself understood as an unending, reflective process that requires critical thinking, clarity about embedded social-political values, and a blend of new and old professional capacities. As we understand it, the technologies of the future are both digital, organisational and inter-personal, and our aim is to not only understand but actively engage in designing this future within our classrooms and offices.

Third, the actual student cohorts from the class are actively engaged in helping author the development of the curriculum. Students are regularly surveyed via anonymous polls and group conversation, in and out of class. The class themes, learning activities and assessment have been partly shaped through this student engagement. In addition, the regular engagement between students and external stakeholders during the course are designed to create new professional opportunities and career pipelines. Certain industry stakeholders, for example, run a variety of work placement / employment schemes, and these graduates offer a more tailored set of skills when joining their respective employers. We are seeing an increasing number of students being placed in a variety of roles among our stakeholders and within a number of different (often legal) services.

In Spring 2021, we are currently running the course and already designing how we will reinvent the course for 2021-2022. A few targets are becoming concrete. First, we will continue to bring in an explicitly hands-on, simulated case study aspect into every class session. Second, we will organise each session

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to allow diverse learning formats, from small groups working on a common problem, to actual opportunities to automate documents and build legal apps in real time, to learning about blockchain and bringing in computer engineers and academics, all toward assessment based on group presentations and independent led research and essays. Third, we are linking the sessions into a semester long narrative, where students slowly develop a range of competencies through an ongoing case study that extends through all the class sessions and incorporates a wide variety of perspectives and professional roles. Fourth, our success will be the extent that our graduates experience greater opportunities and satisfaction, and employers continue to increasingly see the value in employing these graduates. Finally, we will continue to develop extra-curricular initiatives and which inform and are influenced by the class sessions. For instance, we run an annual hack-a-thon, which collaborates with a legal tech app building company who also teaches on the curriculum, and that offers opportunities for industry and students to build community and work together. The students within many of these extra-curricular actives come from law and non-law backgrounds, and we are actively working to amplifying the diverse fields included in these events, and we are especially working to orient these efforts toward addressing historic and ongoing inequalities (e.g., gender, race, socio-economic demographies). Equally, in relation to research and scholarship, this applied engagement between academics and stakeholders is informed and helps shape the direction of ongoing research and writing. Most recently, our course director has submitted a long article for journal publication on the US Law School markets, which is based on an industry funded empirically focused study on law and technology markets within approximately 200 law schools made widely available via social media and online platforms - and this study, in turn, inspired not only reforms to class delivery, but also the new ESRC grant bid application. Our aim is to continue with these priorities, and we see this as an open, non-proprietary endeavour and a very much are committed to sharing information and lessons and offering resources to building a healthy, inclusive and participatory community of innovation in relation to digital technology and law.

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