Industry Brief
IBM Watson Academic Initiative
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What is it?

The Watson Academic Initiative offers collaborative investments of time and resources between IBM and universities designed to encourage learning through experimentation and application of IBM's Watson cognitive computing platform. This program is an extension of the IBM Academic Initiative.

Who created it?

NYSE: IBM

What does it do?

The IBM Watson Academic Initiative is designed to:

- Identify cognitive computing skills, and build those skills
- Encourage student engagement with cognitive computing by providing hands-on experiences
- Determine what universities can contribute to Watson's development
- Examine how Watson will redefine the future of computing

Why is it important?

The lackluster performance of artificial intelligence in general problem solving caused a decline in student engagement and in cognitive computing programs. The Watson Academic Initiative intends to leverage Watson's early successes to generate a wellspring of interest in cognitive computing at the university level in order to nurture the next generation of cognitive computing scientists.

Where can I get it?

IBM has invited up to 100 universities on 6 continents to participate in a pilot course while others will deep dive using Watson BlueMix services. Contact your local IBM university liaison for more information.

When it is available?

The Watson Academic Initiative is available in the US now, with a larger global roll-out in 2015.

How much does it cost?

There is no cost to participant universities.

Where is it available?

IBM Watson is available globally.

Primary competitors

No direct competitors, though big data start-ups like Palantir, Context Relevant, Ayasdi and others may compete in certain applications like fraud detection, stock trade optimization and pattern discovery in areas like oncology, and various forms of risk assessment in security, healthcare and insurance. Only IBM is partnering with university research at this level of commitment and detail.

Commentary

Although on the surface, The Watson Academic Initiative may appear self-serving, it is an important investment in cognitive computing regardless of IBM's ability to transform Watson into a $10-billion product line. Artificial intelligence lost much of its luster after failures in the 1980s and 1990s to make it broadly useful to recurring, common business problems.

The Watson technology must solve several types of problems to achieve success. Cognitive computing platforms and their derivatives require domain expertise and real-world applications to fine tune their knowledge representation and inference capabilities. Domain-specific applications may also generate requirements for net new processing methods.

It is hoped that these university projects, challenges and contests will help Watson develop into a more rounded platform. If IBM and its partner universities are successful, Watson may be the first cognitive computing platform to eliminate the domain expertise edge common among cognitive systems limited to solving only once class of problems.

The accession of Big Data has fed the need for computing innovation as businesses, not-for-profits and governments seek to produce insight and make faster, more accurate decisions. While predictive analytics offers the ability to provide near realtime reaction to sensors and other data, technology like Watson adds pattern discovery across datasets, and the revelation of deep data structures.

The development of curriculum, multiple paths to student engagement and exposure to technology will benefit those who gain an opportunity to work with IBM and its professional developers.

IBM's offerings, from courses to projects, provides participant universities with a continuum of choices from which they can evolve their cognitive computing learning experiences.