

**Association of Law Teachers Conference 2026**  
**Reimagining Legal Education for the Future of Law**  
**Exeter University**  
**Sir Geoffrey Vos, Master of the Rolls**  
**Lawyers and Legal Education in the Machine Age**  
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**Introduction**

1. Many thanks to Professor Caroline Fournet (head of school, Exeter Law School) and Professor Mark O'Brien (chair, Association of Law Teachers, City St George's, University of London) for their kind invitation and introduction. It is an honour to be addressing the 61<sup>st</sup> ALT Conference.
2. I have been saying for some time that we are at a turning point in the delivery of justice. That turning point affects us here in England and Wales, but it also affects or will affect every other jurisdiction. I would suggest that it is incumbent on you as law teachers in the UK to embrace the new position in which we find ourselves so as better to prepare the new generation of lawyers for what lies ahead.
3. The question, of course, is what actually does lie ahead? That is a question on which we might not all agree. But I shall adopt one simple premise for this lecture. And that is that those who suggest that lawyers will not be needed in, what I call the machine age, are wrong. In my view, lawyers will be needed as much, if not more, in the machine age. But they should not expect to be doing exactly the same things in exactly the same way, because new technologies will change much of that. Those who do not understand these basic premises will, in my view, be caught out. It is incumbent on all of us in positions of authority to devote close attention to how things are changing so as properly to equip ourselves and the new generation of young lawyers for the future as it is really likely

to be, not the situation as it was when all of us were at law school.

4. With that introduction, let me tell you how I shall address these important issues in this short lecture today.
5. First, I will address my perspective as to what the delivery of justice will actually look like 15 or 20 years from now. Secondly, I will address the likely role of lawyers in what one might call the machine age delivery of justice. Finally, I will take an inexperienced look at how legal education might need to develop to meet the changes in the landscape that I am suggesting may eventuate.

#### What will the delivery of justice look like in the machine age?

6. If any of you have chanced upon any of my recent lectures, you will know that I take the view that the justice system will not escape the changes that are being wrought by the advent of hugely capable artificial intelligence. I am not going to take time today to deal with the difficulties that may be posed by article 14 of the EU's AI Act<sup>1</sup> or by article 22 of the GDPR,<sup>2</sup> or by the impact that article 6 of the ECHR<sup>3</sup> may have on the use of AI to assist or actually take judicial decisions.
7. To cut a long story short, I think it is inevitable that basic economics will dictate, at the very least, that routine judicial

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<sup>1</sup> Justice Systems are High Risk Systems under the EU's AI Act. Article 14 provides that "[h]igh-risk AI systems shall be designed and developed in such a way, including with appropriate human-machine interface tools, that they can be effectively overseen by natural persons during the period in which they are in use".

<sup>2</sup> Article 22 of the GDPR provides that: "[t]he data subject shall have the right not to be subject to a decision based solely on automated processing, including profiling, which produces legal effects concerning him or her or similarly significantly affects him or her".

<sup>3</sup> Article 6 of the ECHR provides that: "[i]n the determination of his civil rights and obligations or of any criminal charge against him, everyone is entitled to a fair and public hearing within a reasonable time by an independent and impartial tribunal established by law".

decision-making will, in the timescale I am talking about, be informed or directed by machines. Those programmes will be, if they are not already, as reliable as human judges. They will, in the first instance, be used only with the agreement of the parties, but that acceptance will rapidly become routine, as the parties to disputes realise that it is far quicker and far cheaper to allow a machine to decide run-of-the-mill legal questions. I am fortified in my views on this by a very recent report from a group of French speaking academics from *Le Club des Juristes* entitled: *Intelligence Artificielle et justice civile: perspectives and ambitions*, which includes the recommendation that: “[t]he use of algorithmic systems, including AI, should also be considered in compensation litigation, such as personal injury compensation”.<sup>4</sup> I shall say a bit more about that report in a lecture that I shall give at the end of the month in Edinburgh.

8. I cannot say now how far routine judicial decision-making may extend. But I would guess that it will go further than many may now imagine. For example, as *le Club des Juristes* identified, a determination of the personal injury damages to which a claimant is entitled is very much a mechanical or algorithmic exercise once the machine can have access to every relevant recent court authority on such assessments.
9. The fact that the resolution of many disputes (small and, perhaps over time, large too) will likely be informed or provided by machines does not, to me at least, signify the end of lawyers or judges. That widely suggested prediction misunderstands, in my view, the turning point with which we are faced. Humans are not rendered superfluous to justice because some, even many, essential intellectual tasks, can be undertaken by machines. Humans are and will be as irreplaceable to other humans then as now. It is just that their roles will be different. Humans will remain crucial to the development of legal principles as human culture and human

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<sup>4</sup> In French at [5.1]: L’emploi de systèmes algorithmiques, dont l’IA, est également à considérer dans le cas des contentieux indemnitaires, comme la réparation du préjudice corporel.

society change. Machines will probably not be able to develop the law for the benefit of humanity in the way that human judges can do.

10. There are a number of further reasons why humans will remain critical to the justice system.
11. First, machines take decisions very quickly, but humans take a considerable amount of time: (a) to understand such decisions, and (b) perhaps even more importantly to **accept** those decisions. Humans will remain instrumental in guiding and assisting other humans towards the understanding and acceptance of machine-made decision-making.
12. Secondly, the delivery of justice is as much about the confidence and trust that humans have in the system as it is about the precise outcomes. In some ways, humans are strange creatures in that they will sometimes accept less just solutions as easily as just outcomes. I frequently give the example of the irritable (perhaps even unjust) judge of yesteryear, whose erratic decisions were probably appealed no more often than their more reliable and less irascible colleagues are today.
13. Thirdly, we have not yet even scratched the surface of trying properly to understand what justice will really look like in a society that has matured with the benefit and in the shadow of highly capable Artificial Intelligence. Older lawyers, amongst whom I undoubtedly count myself, tend to assume that the Facebook, Instagram and Tik-Tok generations (each of which, by the way, is quite distinct) either do or will understand and value justice in the same way as we do. For the avoidance of doubt, it will be well understood that these generations are defined by much more than just their social media platform of choice; I use the shorthand with that caveat.
14. It is, in my view, a fundamental misunderstanding to think that these modern generations understand justice in the same way as we do. Many in the Tik-Tok generation assume that knowledge and insight on any subject can be obtained in an instant at the tap of a screen. They consume information in a far shorter format than previous generations. They do not

necessarily value, respect or evaluate traditional learning in the way that my generation did so. But it would be a mistake to think that that means that these young people are either unprincipled or disrespectful. They are neither. Their values are, however, moulded by the machines that have shaped their education and their social lives. That includes their value, understanding and expectations of justice and a justice system. We, the guardians of that system, need to take notice of those fundamental changes.

15. Fourthly, I have spoken much about the creation of Digital Justice System that integrates the online provision of legal information, legal advice and dispute resolution. When, as it surely will in the timescale I am considering, the Digital Justice System becomes a reality, it will streamline the provision of not only online machine-assisted dispute resolution, but also reliable and useful machine-provided legal information and advice. We already know that, however we lawyers might deprecate it, almost everyone's first port of call for legal advice is to ask a publicly available AI such as ChatGPT, CoPilot, Claude or Gemini. If the "everyone" is rich or a lawyer themselves, that first port of call might be a dedicated legal advice programme such as Harvey or Legura, but the first port of call for literally everyone is still a machine rather than a human lawyer.
16. These realities, which I have briefly described, will not lessen or abate. They are likely to accelerate. Machine made decisions in all areas will be taken more often and more quickly and will be harder and harder for humans to understand and accept – as our society becomes more complex and confusing. Humans will continue to demand and require justice solutions that they trust, understand and can be confident about. The generations that follow the Tik-Tok generation will not have longer attention spans. They will continue to find their knowledge and insight from online sources. Their values and expectations will develop under the umbrella of the ubiquity of machine-delivered legal advice and solutions. The Digital Justice System will feed these expectations and provide a very different justice scene from what we have grown up with. It will be essential that the

(older) analogue generations, just as the Facebook, Instagram and Tik-Tok generations, get used to the new order in which justice will have to be delivered.

17. I suppose I may have failed to give you a complete picture of what the delivery of justice will look like in the machine age, but I hope I have given you at least a glimpse of how things are already changing and the mistakes we will make if we assume that the justice system with which we grew up is has or is going to remain unchanged.

### The likely role of lawyers in machine age justice

18. I guess you already knew what I have already said, namely that everyone everywhere uses ChatGPT and other AIs as their first port of call for legal advice. In many cases, they use the same tools to create the documents needed to initiate small (and even some larger) claims. That is already resulting in a noticeable absolute increase in County Court claims, as well as a spike in claims that have been created wholly or partly by AI. Many of my judicial colleagues report that the use of AI by litigants in person has noticeably **enhanced** the quality of both the written and the oral submissions that they are able to make to the court.
19. All of this will also affect the role of lawyers in the future.
20. The first thing that I am going to mention is already widely observed in law firms. The clients still come to lawyers. But instead of coming to seek legal advice, they come to seek a lawyer's confirmation of the correctness of what AI has told them is the legal position. And, of course, they do not want to pay their lawyer the same fee as they would have paid before they had access to AI-driven legal advice. This phenomenon is already leading to reduced law firm recruitment. And, where the law firms are recruiting, they are looking for different skill sets. Of course, they are looking for tech-savvy young lawyers, para-legals and tech-savvy non-lawyers. But that is not all, they need a very particular kind of client-facing

lawyers to lead and guide both tech-savvy and tech-sceptic clients through the minefield of AI-driven justice.

21. Secondly, lawyers will themselves have to adapt to use AI in their work, and to use it in a way that adds value for their clients above and beyond what the clients can do with AI themselves.
22. The third thing that will be crucial to modern lawyering is to understand the phenomenon and expectations of the Tik-Tok generation and the generations that are to come. I have already touched on this. The shorter attention spans will be important to the way we provide legal information and advice in the context of consumer, criminal, family and small claims issues. But it will be equally important to the provision of legal services to SMEs and big business. The Tik-Tok generation (if you will forgive the repeated use of that abbreviation) view their jobs quite differently to the way we viewed them.
23. I have mentioned a number of the competing factors and influences at play already. They include: (i) the widespread availability of technical machine-driven legal information and advice, (ii) the quite-different working practices of modern generations including working from home and the online acquisition of genuinely new information and ideas, (iii) new and different social skills acquired online and acquired through creating content online, (iv) new requirements for justice to be delivered at speed without waiting for months or years for judicial hearings and appeal court decisions, (v) new attitudes to the quality of justice required, and (vi) a reconsideration, in the light of AI, of the amount that younger people may be prepared to pay for justice outcomes.
24. But fourthly and perhaps most importantly, I think that lawyers of the future will need to adapt their business models considerably to take account of these three things: (a) the fact that their clients get pre-existing answers from AI, (b) they can and must use AI themselves to make the delivery of reliable legal advice quicker and cheaper, and (c) the changed working practices and justice expectations of those to whom legal advice is delivered.

25. In my view, it will not be possible for any one observer to predict precisely how the interaction of these factors will affect the legal scene for the next 20 years. Undoubtedly, though, the changes will be radical and fundamental.
26. I am not suggesting that lawyers will be unnecessary in the future - far from it. But lawyers will need to adapt quickly to the changing expectations of young people brought up with the ability to find out anything by tapping a portable screen.

How legal education might need to develop to meet the needs of machine age justice?

27. I am sure you can already see where I am going.
28. In the past, I have suggested that the courses that law students will need to follow will change fundamentally in the light of new technologies. Others have suggested that machine age lawyers will need to learn coding and quantum computing. Some certainly may, but I am reconsidering my thoughts on this.
29. As tools like Harvey and Legura are improved and perfected, legal research will undoubtedly form a lesser part of a lawyer's workload. Legal analysis and strategy will, however, remain. To be a good lawyer, actually to be a lawyer at all, one needs to understand the way the law works. Whilst a comprehensive Digital Justice System, delivered under the auspices of the Online Procedure Rules Committee, is likely to simplify process and procedure, it will not abrogate the need for legal thinking and reasoning.
30. It will be hard to train lawyers in these analytical skills when AI will be doing a lot of the underlying legal research and legal groundwork. But I am sure we will find ways around that problem. Legal training will need to be different, but law students will still need to understand the basic parameters of contract, tort, criminal, family law, company law, administrative and property law.

31. I think these basic subjects will remain important to the ability of human lawyers to explain the output from well-trained machines. As I have explained, humans will take much longer to grasp and accept what may sometimes seem to be surprising conclusions reached by machines, than the machines will take to reach those conclusions.
32. Lawyers will still be needed to interact with, and make submissions to, human judges, since I cannot envisage a time in which human judges will not retain the right to undertake the final resolution of the most difficult and consequential legal decision-making.
33. There are, however, a whole host of other changes that will need to be factored into legal education for the machine age.
34. First, the ethics of justice and the usages of new technologies by lawyers and judges are changing rapidly. Ethics will need to be taught through a new lens.
35. Secondly, an understanding of data protection and data security is far more fundamental than it was before the ubiquitous use of AI tools. This will no longer be an optional segment of legal training.
36. Thirdly, it is, of course, as important for lawyers and judges to be able to spot fakes generated by AI, as it is for them to be able to spot fake allegations that genuine materials are AI fake. These skills are more critical now than ever before. Spotting cyber fakes is just one part of cyber security.
37. I have only scratched the surface. We need a complete re-think of how we prepare our young lawyers for practice in the machine age.

### Conclusions

38. To conclude this canter through the changes that you can expect in the near future in the legal education landscape, let me sum up where I think we are.

39. The machine age will certainly affect the delivery of justice in relation to the tools we use to advise and to decide outcomes. But perhaps the greatest changes will not be in the tools we use, since those have been improving incrementally in the nearly 50 years I have been in the law.
40. As I see it, the greatest change will be in what individuals and businesses expect from the law and the justice system. They will no longer value lawyers in the same way because they will have their own access to the previously forbidden land of laws and legal precedents. All that will be available, much of it free of charge, by the use of AI driven tools. Instead, they will value the guidance and insight that trained lawyers can give to explain what the machines have advised and, perhaps also, determined.
41. One of the many hidden trends in our rapidly changing society is the accelerating complexity of all our lives. Even the Tik-Tok generation do not find that complexity easy to navigate and understand. Lawyers will still comprise a section of society with a better grasp of the rules and the ways in which those rules operate to affect everyone's daily lives. The ability to understand, martial and explain complexity in a world of ever more capable machines will be crucial to the survival of the legal community. Law teachers will be at the sharp end of the transition from where we are now to where we will need to be.
42. Many thanks for listening. I look forward to your questions.