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A Critical Review of AI in Higher Education: Comparative Insights from the Legal Sector

Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly expanded across higher education, transforming teaching, learning and institutional administration through tools such as automated assessment, predictive analytics, intelligent tutoring systems and learning analytics. This paper reviews UK and international literature to examine both the opportunities and risks created by AI's integration into universities. Evidence suggests that AI can increase efficiency by reducing repetitive academic workload, support personalised learning through adaptive feedback and 24/7 virtual assistance, and enhance inclusivity by tailoring support for diverse learners. It may also strengthen workforce preparation, particularly as governments (including the UK) invest in AI skills development and employers increasingly expect graduates to be AI-literate.

However, these benefits are counterbalanced by significant challenges. Predictive analytics raises ethical concerns around consent, surveillance, privacy and accountability. Generative AI tools intensify academic integrity risks, with current detection systems demonstrating limited reliability. A further barrier is uneven competence among students and staff, which can lead to unethical use, misinterpretation of outputs and inconsistent adoption across institutions, potentially widening existing inequalities. Ongoing concerns also persist regarding bias, inaccuracies and "hallucinations," which complicate trust in AI-supported learning and assessment.

A case study of AI adoption in the legal industry illustrates parallel dynamics: AI streamlines information-heavy tasks such as legal research and document review, yet introduces risks relating to confidentiality, professional responsibility and over-reliance. This comparison supports the argument that AI is more likely to augment than replace professional expertise and underscores the need for higher education to embed AI literacy, critical evaluation skills and ethical training into curricula. The paper concludes that universities should pursue balanced AI integration leveraging innovation while strengthening governance and standards and calls for future research into transparent institutional frameworks and cross-sector ethical guidelines for responsible adoption.

Keywords

Artificial intelligence; generative AI; higher education; UK legal education; legal practice; curriculum design; assessment integrity; verification; professional ethics; learning analytics.

1. Introduction

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development describe artificial intelligence (AI) as "a transformative technology capable of tasks that typically require human-like intelligence, such as understanding language, recognising patterns and making decisions." It has expanded rapidly across multiple industries from construction and manufacturing to medicine and finance and has transformed the way in which organisations operate.[1] Higher education has seen an increased use in AI in the last five years to enhance learning, generate assessment resources and provide personalised feedback to students. It has provided numerous opportunities for both higher education students and instructors.[2]

The UK Government has invested heavily in training programmes to facilitate AI in boosting productivity, improving research capacity and equipping graduates with high-level technical skills.[3] Contrary to this, with this evolving technology comes evolving challenges and debates around ethics, privacy and academic integrity. This paper explores the impact of AI on higher education, examining both its benefits and risks. It highlights that AI is positioned to enhance rather than replace lawyers which provides a useful insight through which to consider how higher education should prepare graduates for AI-driven professional environments.[4] Literature used in this study is both UK-based and international to capture the wide-ranging effects of AI and its potential to reshape teaching, learning, and professional preparation on a global scale.

2. AI in Higher Education

Literature demonstrates the vast breadth of uses of AI across higher education; it applies to fields including languages, engineering, mathematics and medicine emphasising its versatility.[5] Salas-Pilco and Yang revealed that the most widely adopted use for AI in higher

[1] Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, *Artificial Intelligence Sector Study 2023* (23 October 2024) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/artificial-intelligence-sector-study-2023> accessed 20 September 2025.

[2] Helen Crompton and Diane Burke, 'Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education: The State of the Field' (2023) International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education, 22. <https://educationaltechnologyjournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41239-023-00392-8> accessed 20 September 2025.

[3] Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (n1)

[4] Mari Sako and John Armour, 'New research finds that AI is improving the way the legal sector operates' (*University of Oxford*, 8 December 2021) <https://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/news/new-research-finds-ai-improving-way-legal-sector-operates> accessed 1 October 2025

[5] Crompton and Burke (n2).

education is assessment and evaluation, with its most common use being automatic assessing, generating test materials and providing tailored feedback.[6] This was found to reduce instructors' workload[7] while improving students' academic capabilities, particularly among minority students.[8]

Another significant area of development within the use of AI is predictive analysis. In doing this, AI can anticipate the outcomes and risks of students. The software can be used to input data and generate predictions including grades, or probability of a student dropping out of a course.[9] Chu and others and Ouyang and others note that performance prediction, dropout identification, and satisfaction tracking are now central features of AI applications in higher education. Such uses enable early intervention for students who are predicted to drop out by inputting multiple learning tendencies.[10] However, Crompton raised concerns that AI used in this way is 'sensitive' and risks privacy concerns.[11]

In addition to this, AI can provide direct support to students through virtual assistants and tutors.[12] These facilities support students by asking diagnostic questions which allows them to be assisted promptly.[13] Zawacki-Richter and others supported this by naming 'intelligent tutoring systems' as one of the four main uses of AI in higher education. This supports one to one tutoring personalised to the individual student and is particularly useful in larger cohorts where individual feedback and guidance may be harder to come by.[14]

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[6] Sdenka-Zobeida Salas-Pilco and Yuqin Yang, 'Artificial Intelligence application in Latin America higher education: A systematic review' (2022) 19(21) International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education 1–20

[7] Steven M Rutner and Rebecca A Scott, 'Use of artificial intelligence to grade student discussion boards: An exploratory study' (2022) 20(4) Information Systems Education Journal 4–18.

[8] Zhe Zhang and Ling Xu, 'Student engagement with automated feedback on academic writing: A study on Uyghur ethnic minority students in China' (2022) Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 22 <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2102175> accessed 30 September 2025.

[9] Yan Qian and others 'Research on predicting learning achievement in a flipped classroom based on MOOCs by big data analysis' (2021) Computer Applications in Engineering Education. 30(4) DOI:10.1002/cae.22452.

[10] *ibid*; Fan Ouyang, Luyi Zheng and Peng Cheng Jiao, 'Artificial intelligence in online higher education: A systematic review of empirical research from 2011 to 2020' (2022) 27(6) Education and Information Technologies 7893

[11] Helen Crompton, Mildred V Jones and Diane Burke, 'Affordances and challenges of artificial intelligence in K-12 education: a systematic review' (2022) 56 Journal of Research on Technology in Education 1–21 <https://doi.org/10.1080/15391523.2022.2121344> accessed 20 September 2025.

[12] Ibid 259-260

[13] ChanMin Kim and Kimberly Bennekin, 'The effectiveness of volition support (VoS) in promoting students' effort regulation and performance in an online mathematics course' (2016) 44(4) Instructional Science 359–77. http://www.jstor.org.yorksj.idm.oclc.org/stable/26303043accessed 18 March 2026.

[14] Olaf Zawacki-Richter and others, 'Systematic review of research on artificial intelligence applications in higher education—Where are the educators?' (2019) 16(1) International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education 1–27.

Finally, AI supports the management of student learning and institutional processes. Learning analytics can reveal patterns in student engagement, support curriculum design, and enable more data-driven decision-making. Long and Siemens describe how these systems provide administrators with insights into teaching effectiveness and student progress, allowing institutions to tailor provision more strategically.[15] Salas-Pilco and Yang's research on Latin America further illustrates how AI has been deployed for predictive modelling, intelligent analytics, and automatic content analysis, demonstrating the international value of AI in higher education.[16] This research establishes the versatility of AI from assessment and prediction, to tutoring and institutional analytics. It is reshaping both teaching and administration, while inviting further controversy around its benefits and challenges.

3. Benefits of AI in Higher Education

Literature highlights the expansive benefits to higher education including efficiency, personalisation and enhancing access. A focal advantage lies in its ability to reduce the administrative and repetitive workload of educators. Rutner and Scott demonstrate the importance of automated grading systems and their ability to save significant time while maintaining accuracy across diverse cohorts.[17] This is particularly advantageous given the hit in productivity following lack of recruitment because of Brexit and COVID-19.[18] Similarly, language processing tools are capable of generating assessment questions which allows for instructors to adjust their attention to higher level teaching tasks.[19] This increase in efficiency could be instrumental to increased tutor-to-student mentoring, research and feedback to refine and enhance knowledge.

In addition to this, AI enriches student personalisation by providing instant response to student queries via chatbots. This offers timely assistance that might not otherwise be

[15]Phil Long and George Siemens, 'Penetrating the Fog: Analytics in Learning and Education' (2011) 46(5) EDUCAUSE Review 31 <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2011/9/penetrating-the-fog-analytics-in-learning-and-education> accessed 18 March 2026.
[16] Sdenka-Zobeida Salas-Pilco and Yuqin Yang (n6)
[17] Steven M Rutner and Rebecca A Scott (n7)
[18] Department for Science (n1).
[19]Albert C M Yang and others, 'Automatic Generation of Cloze Items for Repeated Testing to Improve Reading Comprehension' (2021) 24 Educational Technology & Society 147–158.

possible in large classes. This is supported in Kim and Bennekin's study which demonstrated that AI-driven systems could deliver diagnostic support tailored to individual student needs.[20] Crompton and others likewise found that intelligent assistants can adapt to students' academic profiles and preferences, offering a more individualised learning experience. By enabling round-the-clock access to guidance, these tools reduce barriers to engagement and help students feel more supported in their studies.[21] To add to this, the ability to tailor assistance to students widens the scope for inclusivity. AI has the capacity to assist learners with diverse needs, including those from linguistic minorities. Zhang and Xu, for instance, showed how automated assessment improved the writing skills of Uyghur minority students in China.[22] This suggests that AI can help address disparities in higher education by offering tailored support that would be difficult for human instructors to provide at scale.

Finally, AI's integration into higher education is increasingly linked to preparing graduates for the future workforce. Governments and institutions are recognising the importance of embedding AI literacy into curricula, not only to enhance learning but also to develop skills demanded by employers. The UK Government has invested in postgraduate AI programmes to strengthen national leadership in the field and ensure that students are equipped for high-skill, technology-driven roles[23]. By fostering both familiarity with AI tools and critical engagement with their outputs, higher education can play a key role in shaping a workforce ready for AI-augmented industries.

Ultimately, studies show that future lawyers will emerge into the profession as "legal technologists" and there will be a rise in jobs requiring more technical legal skills. This depicts the inevitability of AI within the legal industry and as a result, should be integrated into higher education to prepare future lawyers.[24]

AI offers considerable opportunities for efficiency, personalisation, inclusivity, and workforce preparation. These benefits highlight its potential to transform higher education, though they must be considered alongside the challenges and risks that accompany its use. While AI comes with many benefits, it also comes with challenges and risks made clear in literature including the ethical use of AI. Crompton highlights the sensitivity of using AI for

[20]ChanMin Kim and Kimberly Bennekin (n13).
[21]Helen Crompton and Diane Burke (n2).
[22]Zhang and Xu (n 8).
[23]Department for Science (n1).
[24]Mari Sako and John Armour (n4).

predictive analysis which requires the inputting of sensitive student data raising concern around consent, surveillance and potential misuse.[25] This underscores the need to implement clear policies on ownership, transparency and accountability.

Another important issue regards academic integrity and plagiarism. As generative tools such as ChatGPT become more readily available, they facilitate misuse of systems by students to produce essays without genuine engagement. Recent studies debated whether such tools present a threat to authenticity of academic work, particularly in research-heavy fields such as law. While AI detection software is being developed, their accuracy remains challenged leaving academic institutions uncertain on how to uphold rigorous academic standards. Weber-Wulff tested detection tools for both human and AI generated text and found that no tools tested were accurate or reliable in deciphering between them.[26] Another study showed that such tools could detect older models of AI but could not detect the newer models.[27]

Similarly, Delcker and others highlighted what could be called a 'competence gap'. The study highlighted a lack of knowledge among first-years regarding the use of AI despite expressing a curiosity and willingness to engage with it. Without adequate knowledge, this could promote unethical uses of AI tools as students do not know the ethical ways in which they could use AI.[28] It may mean that students struggle to interpret information generated on AI which could undermine the potential for it to enhance learning. Similarly, educators may lack this same knowledge and training around AI which inhibits their ability to fully advantage from using it in their teaching practices which is likely to cause inconsistent application across institutions.[29] This inequality in application across institutions could further complicate the

[25]Helen Crompton and Diane Burke (n2).
[26]Debora Weber-Wulff and others, 'Testing of detection tools for AI-generated text' (2023) 19 *International Journal for Educational Integrity* art 26 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40979-023-00146-z> accessed 20 September 2025.
[27]Ahmed Elkhatat, Khaled Elsaid and Saeed Almeer, 'Evaluating the efficacy of AI content detection tools in differentiating between human and AI-generated text' (2023) 19 International Journal for Educational Integrity <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40979-023-00140-5> accessed 20 September 2025.
[28] Jan Delcker and others, 'First-year students' AI-competence as a predictor for intended and de facto use of AI-tools for supporting learning processes in higher education' (2024) 21 International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education 18 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-024-00452-7> accessed 20 September 2025.
[29]Maria Lindfors , Fanny Pettersson and Anders Olofsson , 'Conditions for professional digital competence: the teacher educators' view' (2021) 12(4) Education Inquiry 390–409 <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2021.1890936> accessed 20 September 2025.

integration of AI. Alamri [30] and Borte[31] highlighted that it could create disparities in how AI can be utilised. Without investment in infrastructure and professional development, AI risks widening existing gaps rather than closing them.

A clear issue with AI is the issues of trust and reliability. Though AI systems are constantly evolving, they are prone to generating bias or inaccurate results which Zamfirescu-Pereira described as "hallucinations."[32] AI platforms such as ChatGPT acknowledge this by prefacing 'ChatGPT can make mistakes. Check important info.' This raises queries about how much educators and students should rely on AI, especially when accuracy is critical to assessment or research.

To summarise, the challenges of AI in higher education extend beyond technical limitations to encompass ethical, academic, and institutional issues. Mitigating these risks is essential to combat the evolving technology and allow AI to move from being a novelty to a sustainable and trusted tool within higher education.

Case Study: AI in the Legal Industry

The legal industry provides a valuable case study for understanding how higher education must adapt to prepare students for AI-augmented professional environments. Adoption of AI in law firms has accelerated in recent years, with the Clio Legal Trends Report noting that 79% of legal professionals have adopted AI in some form, and one in four use it widely within their practice.[33] This adoption is driven by the automation of repetitive, information-heavy tasks such as document review, contract analysis, and legal research.

[30] Hamdan Alamri, Sunnie Watson and William Watson, 'Learning Technology Models that Support Personalization within Blended Learning Environments in Higher Education' (2020) 65 TechTrends 62 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-020-00530-3> accessed 20 September 2025.

[31] Kristin Borte, Katrine Nesje and Solvi Lillejord, 'Barriers to Students' Active Learning in Higher Education' (2020) 28 Teaching in Higher Education 597–615 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1839746> accessed 20 September 2025.

[32] JD Zamfirescu-Pereira and others, 'Why Johnny Can't Prompt: How Non-AI Experts Try (and Fail) to Design LLM Prompts' in *Proceedings of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (ACM 2023) <https://doi.org/10.1145/3544548.3581388> accessed 20 September 2025.

[33] Clio, 'Legal Trends Report' (Clio 2024) <https://www.clio.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/NA-2024-Legal-Trends-Report-Full-Publication.pdf> accessed 20 September 2025.

Goldman Sachs estimated that nearly 44% of legal tasks could be automated, a figure that underscores the scale of AI's potential to reshape the profession.[34]

The benefits of AI in law are clear. Tasks such as legal research are traditionally time-consuming. With the application of AI tools, research can be completed in minutes with their ability to scan and summarise vast bodies of case law and legislation.[35] These tools can also enhance client service by utilising chatbots to handle enquiries and schedule appointments instantaneously.[36] Facilitating AI in this way could be instrumental in time management, allowing fee earners to focus on higher-value activities such as strategy, advocacy and client engagement, alleviating them of the simpler tasks that AI can fulfil. This reinforces Legg and Bell's argument that AI is more likely to enhance than replace the role of lawyers, as ultimately the personability and face to face client engagement offered by lawyers is irreplaceable.[37]

However, the adoption of AI in law comes with similar risks to that of higher education including the risk of bias, inaccuracies and confidentiality breaches. The Solicitors Regulation Authority highlighted this concern and highlighted that the ultimate responsibility of practitioners for advice and outcomes remains with human lawyers.[38] Moreover, LexisNexis surveys indicate that while enthusiasm for AI is high, many legal professionals remain sceptical about its trustworthiness, citing security concerns and fears of over-reliance on generative tools.[39]

These developments carry important implications for higher education. They demonstrate the need for graduates to be prepared with a strong foundation of digital literacy and critical evaluation skills, so they do not fall foul of the imperfections of AI. Brown suggested that firms who fail to invest in AI tools risk losing talent and highlights the

[34]London School of Economics, 'AI in law and the legal profession: industry insights report' (LSE Law School 2023) <https://www.lse.ac.uk/law/Assets/Documents/news/AI-in-Law-the-Legal-Profession-Industry-Insights-Report.pdf> accessed 30 September 2025.
[35] David Pickup, 'AI and the Legal Profession: Transforming the Future of Law' (*The Law Society Gazette*, April 2024) <https://www.lawgazette.co.uk/reviews/ai-and-the-legal-profession-transforming-the-future-of-law/5119432.article> accessed 5 October 2025.
[36] Stu White, 'How AI is reshaping the future of legal practice' (*Law Society*, 20 November 2024) <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/en/topics/ai-and-lawtech/partner-content/how-ai-is-reshaping-the-future-of-legal-practice> accessed 5 October 2025
[37]Legg M and Bell F, 'Artificial Intelligence and the Legal Profession: Becoming the AI-Enhanced Lawyer' (2019) 38(2) University of Tasmania Law Review 34–59.
[38] Solicitors Regulation Authority, 'Risk Outlook: the Use of Artificial Intelligence in the Legal Market' (SRA, 20 November 2023) <https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/research-publications/artificial-intelligence-legal-market> accessed 22 September 2025.
[39]Jan Delcker and others (n28).

importance of integrating technology and human judgement to enhance the law industry.[40] This promotes the need to embed AI literacy and ethical training into law curricula to ensure that graduates can work responsibly.

Comparative insights and implication for higher education

The role of AI in higher education shows many overlapping trends of that of the legal industry, in particular, the risks of ethics. In both contexts, AI offers clear benefits in streamlining time consuming tasks and enabling the redirection of efforts towards more important activities whether its reducing time spend on grading assessments or shifting the focus to client engagement and strategic analysis.[41] This enhances the ability to apply human expertise. While the ethical and integrity risks lie with academic rigour and data privacy in higher education[42], in the legal industry the risks fall with accuracy, client confidentiality and professional accountability.[43] Despite the differences, the underlying issues remain the same; AI yet time efficient cannot guarantee its reliability, and over-reliance risks undermining professional standards.

Another similarity lies in the knowledge gap. Both students and lawyers show uncertainty about the uses and trustworthiness of AI.[44] In both cases, professional competence depends not only on access to AI tools but also on the ability to critically evaluate and responsibly apply their outputs. This likeness underscores the vital role of bridging the gap between technology and human judgement, this can be affected in higher education. By embedding AI literacy and ethical awareness into curricula, universities can prepare graduates who are not only proficient users of AI but also critical thinkers capable of navigating its limitations in professional practice. The legal industry serves as a compelling example of why such preparation is necessary: graduates entering law must be equipped to thrive in a workplace where AI is a pervasive yet imperfect tool.

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[40]Dylan Brown, 'The AI Culture Clash: AI Integration Lags Behind the Hype,' (*Artificial Lawyer,* October 2025) <https://www.artificiallawyer.com/2025/10/13/the-ai-culture-clash-ai-integration-lags-behind-the-hype/> accessed 15 October 2025

[41]Steven M Rutner and Rebecca A Scott (n7); David Pickup (n35)

[42]Helen Crompton and Diane Burke (n2).

[43]Solicitors Regulation Authority(n38)

[44] Jan Delcker and others (n28); Greenhill S, 'Lawyers cross into the new era of generative AI' (LexisNexis, 2024) <https://www.lexisnexis.co.uk/insights/lawyers-cross-into-the-new-era-of-generative-ai/index.html> accessed 2 October 2025.

Conclusion

The literature demonstrates that artificial intelligence is reshaping higher education in profound ways, offering opportunities for efficiency, personalisation, inclusivity, and improved workforce preparation. Automated grading, predictive analytics, intelligent tutoring systems, and learning analytics illustrate the breadth of AI's applications, while government investment and growing student engagement highlight its long-term importance. At the same time, these benefits are balanced by significant challenges, including ethical concerns around privacy and bias, risks to academic integrity, uneven levels of student and staff competence, and questions about the reliability of AI outputs.

The case of the legal industry reinforces these themes. AI is already widely adopted in law, where it supports research, document review, and client services, yet it also raises concerns about accuracy, confidentiality, and over-reliance. The parallels between higher education and law suggest that preparing students for AI-driven professions requires more than technical familiarity: it also demands critical reflection, adaptability, and ethical awareness.

Overall, AI should be seen not as a replacement for human expertise but as a tool that enhances it. Higher education must therefore balance innovation with responsibility, ensuring that graduates can navigate both the opportunities and risks of an AI-integrated future. Future research should focus on developing transparent AI governance frameworks and cross-sectoral ethical standards to ensure responsible adoption in both education and law.

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