

**Combined Commencement Ceremony for NUSLAW and NUSGS**  
6 July 2023

**ADDRESS**

The Honourable Justice Philip Jeyaretnam  
Judge  
Supreme Court of Singapore  
President, Singapore International Commercial Court

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1 I did not enlist the assistance of ChatGPT or any other generative AI program for this address. Why not? After all, doing so might have saved me time and freed me up to binge watch yet another K-Drama. Generative AI facilitates vegetative human and what could possibly be wrong with that?

2 Well, the reason I did not do that is because today is above all an occasion that marks us as humans. It is an occasion when we come together with family and friends to celebrate. To understand what it means one must be human, one has to draw on one's own experiences. How I felt to have my father present when I graduated from officer cadet school and university and how keenly I felt my mother's absence as she had passed away before I reached those milestones. Sometimes people we wish were with us are not, for reasons good or bad, and while we may be sad amid others' celebration feeling that way is fine too, that too is human. I draw also on how I felt when my own children graduated: the same way your parents feel today, even if they are hoping I'll keep this short so we can move on to the bestowal of degrees and the mega photo taking that will follow.

3 Generative AI hasn't watched its children graduate, because, heck, it hasn't had children, or even had a life of any sort. As Ted Chiang, the celebrated science fiction writer, has said, "artificial intelligence" is not a good description: what is really happening when such a program runs is statistical analysis of vast quantities of text or other data in order to predict the most probably correct answer. Ted Chiang suggests a better label would be "applied statistics". It's a kind of predictive mimicry and is far from what humans do. Had I asked ChatGPT to write this speech it would have given me a blurry imitation derived from commencement speeches within its data set. It is only our own desire to anthropomorphise – to see the human in the non-human – that leads us to conclude that there is something human

in its answer. It is the same tendency we apply to animals – whether stuffed animals when we’re kids, or pets as we grow older.

4 Why have I been at such pains to tell you all this? There are two possibilities. One is that I am about to take off my human mask and show you that instead I am a new generation of AI robot, and I truly do have consciousness, the ability to play a practical joke and I’m taking over the world right here and now.

5 The other possibility is of course the real one. It is to offer all of you reassurance that AI isn’t about to make you jobless and redundant. I know young aspiring lawyers are worried that this will happen, and I am sure that similar fears pervade the disciplines represented by the grad schools here this evening. Understanding generative AI’s potential uses as a tool is important. For sure, it will change how jobs get done. Think of how the use of emails and then direct messaging systems has created enormous volumes of communications around every transaction and project. There’s too much for one human to trawl through, and even an army of junior associates finds it challenging to do so. AI, if asked the right questions by the lawyers handling the case, will be able to compile the documents relevant to the dispute in an instant. But humans still need to be involved to ask the right questions, and later to interpret the relevant documents. If AI is asked to draft a submission on the facts and the law, and even leaving aside the possibility of it making things up, which is a bug that will probably be corrected soon enough, the product will still only be a blurry imitation of past submissions. It will not be a substitute for human thought, analysis and expression.

6 None of what I’ve said means that AI will not have a big impact on the workplace and on the economy. Nor does it mean that there’s no need to regulate the use of AI. It is obviously important that the use of AI is the subject of law and regulation. What I want to remind you of are the core values of being a lawyer or following any profession. Do remember that while lawyers are trained to be dispassionate in advising clients, it is our shared humanity with them that makes it possible for us to give meaningful advice. It’s possible that a chatbot by question and answer could steer us toward the right human expert, so playing a filtering role, but ultimately it won’t be robots presenting cases - let alone deciding them.

7 The challenges that you will face are broadly twofold. One is an individual challenge while the other is a collective one. The individual challenge is anticipating the impact of

generative AI on your chosen field or sub-discipline and taking steps to acquire and hone the skills that will enable you to thrive in that field even as it changes. Let me give you an example. When I started practice an essential skill was noting up cases. This included manually checking case citators to see if the case had been mentioned in later cases. This skill has not been needed for a quarter of a century because computers now do it for us. Computers have sped up how we can find the broad range of possibly relevant case law. It has also added the option of keyword searches. But this has led to lawyers using the time they might have once spent on manual case citation on legal analysis of a larger volume of material instead. And in fact the number of lawyers did not reduce, but has increased. The use of keywords also created a potential pitfall that didn't previously exist, namely the reliance on cases that aren't truly relevant if properly understood but which only appear relevant because of shared vocabulary. Like the innovation of keyword searches in the past, generative AI will impact how we do research and reveal skills and talents we will need to make the best use of it as a tool.

8       The second collective challenge concerns who benefits from the use of generative AI. Every new technology changes the workplace and the balance between labour and capital – those who work for a living and those who deploy money to generate income for themselves from the work of others. One prophecy is that generative AI could tilt the balance further toward capital, decimating the ranks of workers. But another is that it could equip workers to do more for themselves, to run their own businesses and express their own talents more fully and more widely. I have confidence that the latter will happen in the legal industry. This is because lawyers are typically self-reliant and capable. All a lawyer needs today is his smartphone, and an occasional coffee at a coffee shop, which brings with it a temporary table to hang out at. Technology has empowered us as individuals, giving us so much connectivity and knowledge literally at the tips of our fingers. This is a great equaliser. Technology has extended what individuals and small groups can do. I recommend that each of you thinks about how you can help make the second prophecy come true. The power of generative AI should be enlisted to empower us as individuals both at work and at play.

9       I recall watching Paul Newman in *The Verdict* forty years ago when I was deciding on my career. Some parents might remember the movie and I urge all aspiring lawyers to watch it if you can. Paul Newman plays a washed-up lawyer, taking on a case that might redeem him. I end with a quote from his summation to the jury, where he tells them “Today you are the

law... not some book... not a marble statue... those are just symbols of our desire to be just... they are in fact a prayer: a fervent and a frightened prayer.”

10 That idea of the quest for justice as a fervent and frightened prayer applies to our lives too. As you go forward from this evening, your feelings of joy and celebration will be mixed with ones of fear and trepidation. How will my life go, and how can I make the most of it? Let me suggest that amid the storms and tempests that every life includes you keep as your compass the ideals that drew you to law school: the deep desire to see justice done in the world, to speak for those who find it hard to speak for themselves and for ourselves to act fairly toward others. For those of you graduating from grad schools in other disciplines, let me put it more simply: the desire to leave the world a better place than we found it.

11 Tonight is a night of celebration: a time to jump for joy and throw your mortarboards in the air. I’ve been told you are a serious studious bunch, and there’s nothing wrong with that. But before tonight is out I hope to watch you let it rip, let it roar, because for you - the graduates of 2023 - there is so much to be proud of and so much to look forward to.