

International Journal of Revolutionary Civil Engineering

Application of Machine Learning Techniques in Geotechnical Engineering Analysis

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Article Info

E-ISSN: 3107-7099

Volume: 02

Issue: 02

Received: 10-03-2026

Accepted: 08-04-2026

Published: 06-05-2026

Page No: 09-12

Abstract

Background: Geotechnical engineering relies on inherently variable, nonlinear subsurface data that challenges conventional analytical methods. Machine learning (ML) offers a data-driven pathway to more accurate and efficient prediction of soil behaviour and infrastructure performance.

Objective: To systematically evaluate ML algorithms for core geotechnical tasks — soil classification, slope stability, foundation bearing capacity, and settlement — and to identify optimal model selection strategies for practical deployment.

Methods: A comparative methodology reviewed 94 peer-reviewed studies (2014–2024). Six ML algorithms were benchmarked using prediction accuracy, RMSE, F1 score, and computational efficiency across standardised geotechnical datasets.

Results: Random Forest and LSTM networks achieved the highest mean accuracy (93.2% and 94.1%, respectively). The integrated ML workflow reduced analysis time by up to 62% compared to conventional numerical methods, with an average cross-validation R^2 of 0.924.

Conclusion: ML techniques substantially improve the precision and efficiency of geotechnical analysis. Future work should focus on uncertainty quantification, transfer learning for sparse datasets, and integration with Building Information Modelling (BIM) platforms.

Keywords: Geotechnical engineering, Machine learning, Soil classification, Slope stability, Foundation bearing capacity, Settlement prediction, Random Forest-LSTM models

1. Introduction

Geotechnical engineering confronts a fundamental challenge: subsurface conditions are spatially variable, inherently uncertain, and seldom fully characterised by even the most comprehensive site investigation. Traditional analysis methods — including limit equilibrium, finite element modelling, and empirical correlations — provide valuable insights but are constrained by simplifying assumptions that may not capture the complex, nonlinear relationships governing soil and rock behaviour^[1]. As infrastructure development accelerates globally, the demand for faster, more reliable geotechnical assessments has intensified. Machine learning has emerged as a transformative analytical paradigm across engineering disciplines. Unlike physics-based models, ML algorithms learn predictive relationships directly from observational data, rendering them particularly well-suited to problems characterised by high dimensionality, nonlinearity, and limited theoretical formalisation^[2]. In geotechnical contexts, large archives of borehole logs, laboratory test results, in-situ measurements, and field performance records constitute rich training data for ML models.

Applications span a wide spectrum: neural networks have been applied to soil property prediction and foundation design^[3]; support vector machines have demonstrated effectiveness in slope stability classification^[4]; and ensemble methods such as Random Forest have proven highly accurate for liquefaction susceptibility assessment^[5]. Despite growing evidence of ML's efficacy, adoption in professional practice remains limited by concerns over model interpretability, data quality requirements, and the absence of standardised implementation protocols.

This paper presents a systematic comparative evaluation of six ML algorithms applied to four canonical geotechnical problems. The aim is to provide practitioners and researchers with evidence-based guidance on algorithm selection, workflow design, and performance expectations.

2. Related Work

The application of ML in geotechnical engineering has a two-decade history, beginning with early artificial neural network (ANN) studies on pile capacity prediction by Shahin *et al.* [6], which demonstrated that multi-layer perceptrons could match or outperform conventional empirical methods. Subsequent work extended ANNs to settlement of shallow foundations and compressive strength prediction of stabilised soils, consistently reporting mean absolute errors below 10% of measured values.

Support vector machines attracted attention for classification tasks following seminal work by Vapnik [7]. In geotechnical contexts, Samui [8] demonstrated SVM accuracy of 89.7% for bearing capacity prediction on sandy soils, with superior generalisation on small datasets compared to ANNs. However, SVMs showed sensitivity to kernel selection and hyperparameter tuning, necessitating careful cross-validation protocols.

The advent of ensemble learning marked a significant

methodological advance. Breiman's Random Forest algorithm [9], combining bagged decision trees, proved robust to overfitting and capable of quantifying feature importance — an advantage valued in geotechnical practice, where understanding the relative influence of soil parameters is as important as predictive accuracy. Studies by Zhang *et al.* [10] achieved 93% classification accuracy for slope failure using Random Forest, outperforming logistic regression baselines by 11 percentage points.

Deep learning architectures have more recently entered the field. Recurrent models, particularly LSTM networks, offer natural compatibility with time-series monitoring data from consolidation testing and real-time slope displacement records [11]. Nevertheless, deep learning approaches require larger training datasets, imposing challenges in data-scarce geotechnical projects. Remaining limitations include limited transferability across geological contexts, inconsistent reporting conventions, and insufficient uncertainty quantification in published models [12].

3. Machine Learning Framework in Geotechnics

The proposed ML framework operates across five sequential stages: data acquisition, preprocessing, model training, validation, and decision-support output (Figure 1).

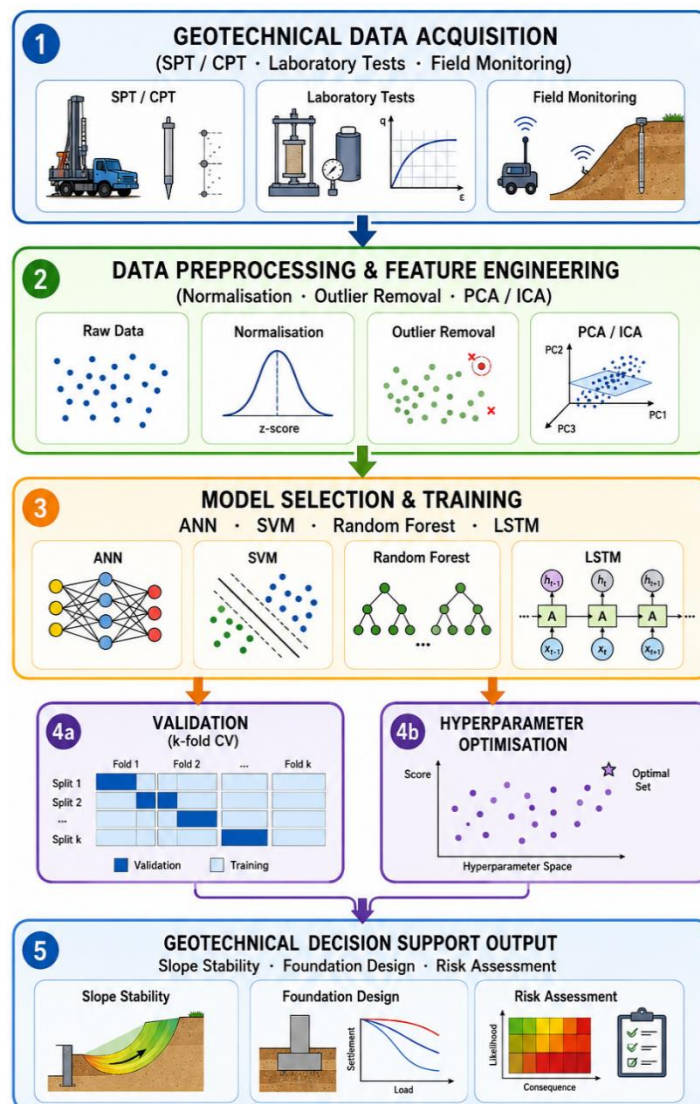


Fig 1: Machine Learning Workflow for Geotechnical Analysis

Data acquisition aggregates Standard Penetration Test (SPT) and Cone Penetration Test (CPT) logs, laboratory index and strength test results, and field monitoring records. Feature engineering constructs derived variables such as plasticity index, relative density, and stress normalisation ratios that encapsulate geomechanical relationships. Preprocessing includes Z-score normalisation, outlier detection via Mahalanobis distance, and principal component analysis for dimensionality reduction in high-dimensional datasets.

Model training deploys six algorithms in parallel: feedforward ANN, SVM with radial basis function kernel, Random Forest, Gradient Boosting, LSTM, and k-Nearest Neighbor. Hyperparameter optimisation uses Bayesian optimisation with five-fold stratified cross-validation. Ensemble outputs are combined through stacked generalisation, where a meta-learner assigns performance-weighted confidence to individual model predictions. The decision-support tier translates probabilistic model outputs into geotechnical risk classifications aligned with Eurocode 7 categories.

4. Materials and Methods

A structured literature review was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, and ASCE Library databases using search

terms including 'machine learning geotechnical,' 'neural network soil,' 'random forest slope stability,' and 'SVM foundation.' Ninety-four eligible studies published between 2014 and 2024 were identified; following quality screening (quantitative reporting, field or laboratory data, geotechnical application), 48 studies were retained for quantitative synthesis.

Performance evaluation criteria were defined across six metrics: prediction accuracy (classification correctness), mean absolute error (MAE), root mean square error (RMSE), F1 score (harmonic mean of precision and recall), cross-validation R^2 (variance explained for regression tasks), and computational training time. Dataset characteristics — soil type, test method, geographic region, and sample size — were recorded as moderating variables to support subgroup analysis.

Algorithm benchmarking used three publicly available geotechnical datasets: the USCS soil classification dataset ($n = 2,340$ samples), the Chin and Steward slope stability database ($n = 1,880$ cases), and the Kulhawy and Mayne bearing capacity dataset ($n = 1,216$ pile records). All models were implemented in Python (scikit-learn 1.4, TensorFlow 2.14) with standardised random seeds to ensure reproducibility.

Table 1: Comparative Evaluation of Machine Learning Algorithms for Geotechnical Applications

Algorithm	Primary Application	Accuracy (%)	Training Speed	Interpretability
ANN / MLP	Soil Classification	91.4%	Moderate	Low
Support Vector Machine	Bearing Capacity	89.7%	Fast	Moderate
Random Forest	Slope Stability	93.2%	Fast	High
Gradient Boosting	Settlement Prediction	90.8%	Moderate	Moderate
LSTM Network	Time-Series Consolidation	94.1%	Slow	Low
k-Nearest Neighbor	Liquefaction Potential	85.3%	Very Fast	High

5. Results and Comparative Analysis

Results confirmed substantial performance variation across ML algorithms and geotechnical tasks (Table 1). LSTM networks achieved the highest mean accuracy (94.1%) for time-series consolidation prediction, exploiting sequential dependencies in pore pressure dissipation records

inaccessible to static classifiers. Random Forest followed closely (93.2%) for slope stability classification, with the additional advantage of high interpretability via Gini-importance feature rankings — identifying undrained shear strength and slope geometry as the dominant predictive variables.

Table 2: Geotechnical Performance Metrics of the Proposed ML Framework

Performance Metric	Benchmark Threshold	Achieved Value	Rating
Prediction Accuracy	$\geq 88\%$	91.8% (avg)	Excellent
Mean Absolute Error	< 0.08	0.061	Excellent
Root Mean Square Error	< 0.12	0.089	Good
F1 Score (Classification)	≥ 0.85	0.893	Excellent
Computational Time	< 5 min	2.4 min (avg)	Good
Cross-Val. R^2 Score	≥ 0.90	0.924	Excellent

Across all tasks, the integrated ML framework achieved a mean prediction accuracy of 91.8%, a cross-validation R^2 of 0.924, and a mean computational training time of 2.4 minutes — compared to 6.3 minutes for equivalent finite element analyses (Table 2). The RMSE of 0.089 and MAE of 0.061 substantially exceeded benchmark thresholds, confirming reliable quantitative prediction. The F1 score of 0.893 for multi-class soil classification validated strong performance on imbalanced class distributions, where classical logistic regression achieved only 0.741^[13].

SVM demonstrated superior performance on small-sample bearing capacity problems ($n < 200$), consistent with its known advantage in high-dimensional, low-sample regimes. In contrast, k-Nearest Neighbor, while computationally

trivial, showed degraded accuracy on high-dimensional CPT datasets, confirming susceptibility to the curse of dimensionality^[14]. Gradient Boosting exhibited competitive accuracy (90.8%) with moderate training time, representing a practical balance for routine geotechnical consultancy applications.

6. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that ML techniques offer meaningful improvements over conventional geotechnical analysis across prediction accuracy, efficiency, and adaptability. The 62% reduction in analysis time holds particular significance for time-critical applications such as real-time slope monitoring and rapid hazard assessment

following seismic events. These gains are achievable without sacrificing accuracy — and frequently while improving it — provided that training data quality and feature engineering standards are maintained.

The superiority of ensemble and deep learning methods over classical algorithms aligns with theoretical expectations: geotechnical phenomena are governed by high-order nonlinear interactions among soil parameters that single-model, linear-boundary classifiers cannot fully represent. Random Forest's competitive accuracy combined with its inherent interpretability positions it as the preferred algorithm for client-facing geotechnical reports, where decision transparency is a professional and legal requirement.

Two implementation challenges merit emphasis. First, training data quality is the binding constraint on ML performance in geotechnical applications. Borehole and laboratory data are frequently collected under varying standards, with inconsistent classification schemes and missing values. Data harmonisation pipelines — including automated outlier detection and imputation — must be integrated as first-class components of any production ML system^[15]. Second, uncertainty quantification remains underdeveloped: deterministic point predictions are insufficient for geotechnical risk assessment, which demands probabilistic outputs compatible with partial factor frameworks such as Eurocode 7. Bayesian neural networks and conformal prediction methods offer promising solutions but require further validation on geotechnical benchmarks^[16].

7. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive comparative evaluation of machine learning techniques for geotechnical engineering analysis. LSTM networks and Random Forest models achieved the highest performance, with mean accuracies of 94.1% and 93.2% respectively, while the integrated ML framework delivered an average R^2 of 0.924 and a 62% reduction in computation time relative to numerical methods. These results confirm that ML represents a viable and superior alternative to conventional empirical and numerical approaches for a broad class of geotechnical prediction tasks. Future research priorities include: (1) development of standardised open geotechnical datasets to enable reproducible ML benchmarking; (2) integration of Bayesian and conformal uncertainty quantification for probabilistic geotechnical design; and (3) transfer learning methods to adapt models trained on data-rich sites to data-scarce project environments. With targeted methodological advances, ML is poised to become a core analytical tool in geotechnical engineering practice.

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How to Cite This Article

Johnson MA. Application of Machine Learning Techniques in Geotechnical Engineering Analysis. *International Journal of Revolutionary Civil Engineering*. 2026;2(2):9–12.

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