

A new chapter: Higher education in the age of AI

Predictions of higher education's demise in the face of AI's continued rise are misguided, writes ESPM's **Rodrigo Cintra**. Here, he makes a compelling case for universities' ability to mould qualities and connections that no algorithm can replace, while emphasising the need to get clear on purpose and strategic direction

In recent months, it has become increasingly common to hear executives from major tech companies proclaiming the end of higher education. The narrative is bold and provocative: if artificial intelligence (AI) can already diagnose illnesses, programme complex systems and answer academic questions in seconds, why spend years in a university classroom?

Some go as far as to say that higher education is nothing more than a waste of time and money. Yet this perspective collapses under closer scrutiny, because it confuses what it means to educate people with what it means to simply perform tasks.

Where higher ed adds value

There is no denying that AI has brought extraordinary advances in efficiency, speed and analytical power. It can process thousands of medical records in minutes, generate sophisticated reports, write software and even suggest business strategies. However, higher education has never been limited to training people to complete specific operations. Educating a doctor, engineer, communicator or business manager is not only about transmitting techniques; it's also about preparing individuals to face uncertainty, interpret contexts, analyse situations for which there are no ready-made answers, make ethical decisions and lead. Universities do not merely deliver skills; they cultivate judgment, critical thinking and discernment – qualities that no algorithm can replicate.

Another crucial dimension overlooked by the “end of university” narrative is the social role of education. Higher education is not just a technical repository; it is also a space for encounter, debate, socialisation and civic formation. It is within these institutions that networks are built, identities are shaped and the capacity to co-exist in diversity is strengthened. Reducing human beings to a productive function, measured solely

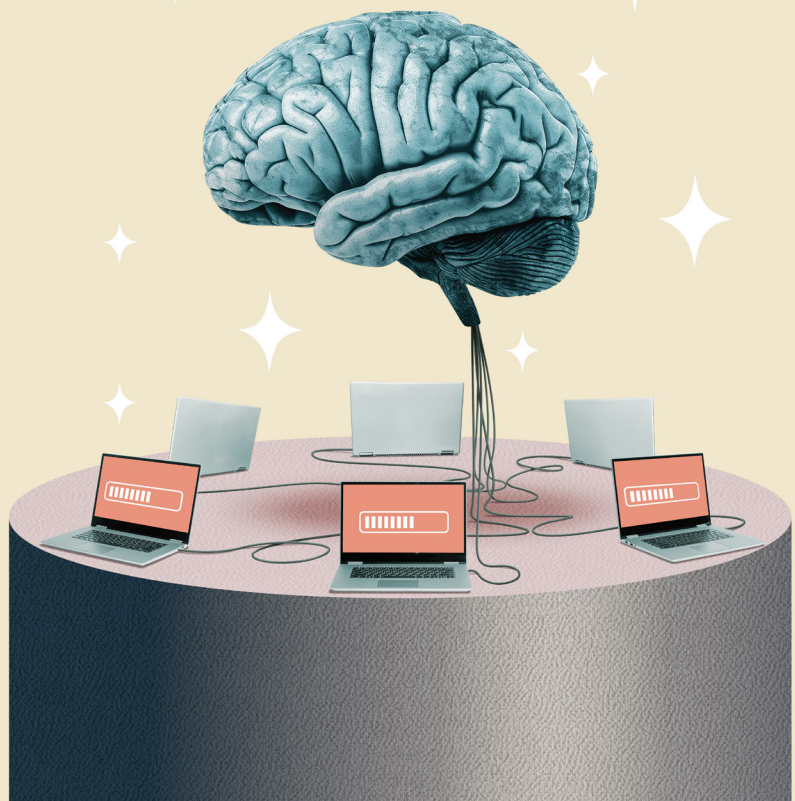
by what can or cannot be automated, compresses their complexity into a caricature, as if life were nothing more than production and consumption. Such a vision is both limited and dangerous, because it ignores the fact that higher education fosters belonging, builds community and nurtures innovation.

Universities do, of course, need to change and perhaps this is the real point. AI should not be seen as a threat to the industry but as a catalyst for necessary transformation. Higher education must rethink its pedagogical models, embrace AI's potential to personalise learning, anticipate student needs and design more active and relevant experiences. At the same time, it must reaffirm the centrality of education's human dimension. The future is not about choosing between universities and AI but rather building convergence between the two.

Adapting to new systems

For such convergence to be viable, universities must adopt a strategic stance towards AI, avoiding both sterile resistance and uncritical adoption. The first dimension of this strategy lies in recognising that education performs a structuring element of social life, as well as an economic function. If universities don't reflect on their broader role in society and simply react in fragmented ways to technological pressures, they risk becoming irrelevant. It is, therefore, essential to be clear on the unique contribution of academic formation beyond instrumental skills: namely the preparation of citizens who can act with ethics, creativity and collective awareness.

The second dimension concerns the building of collaborative ecosystems. Convergence between AI and universities cannot be achieved solely by introducing software into classrooms. Fostering partnerships around common goals with companies, governments and civil society organisations is also essential. In other words, a university or business school must position itself as a curator of meaning in an age of information overload, as a facilitator of interdisciplinary dialogues and as a privileged space for critical experimentation. This mediating role is what allows AI to become an ally in advancing social, scientific and cultural projects of real significance.



Lastly, achieving strategic clarity requires acknowledging that the mission of education is to prepare human beings for a world in permanent transformation. This means rethinking curricula, teaching methods and assessment models, giving priority not only to technical mastery but also to resilience, imagination and empathy. AI may provide unprecedented tools for personalisation and efficiency, but only institutions that are fully aware of their mission will be able to channel those tools towards broader human purposes. Ultimately, the challenge is not technological but philosophical and we must ask ourselves what kind of society we wish to build and how education can serve as the driving force of that collective project.

Reinvention & reaffirmation

The institutions that succeed will be those that balance technological innovation with inclusion, ethics and a humanising approach. Meanwhile, those that cling to outdated formats without questioning their mission or engaging with new tools risk becoming obsolete. The blame for such obsolescence would not lie with AI, but rather with an institution's lack of strategic clarity about what education is meant to deliver in a rapidly changing society.

AI may well handle tasks that were once the domain of experts, but that only heightens the importance of higher education. After all, if machines can operate at the level of execution, it is up to universities to prepare professionals who can interpret, critique, decide, create and co-exist in diverse and unpredictable environments. AI expands our technical capacity, but it is human intelligence that provides direction, meaning and responsibility.

So, while we may continue to hear executives predicting the end of universities, reality points in another direction. Far from disappearing, higher education has the chance to reinvent itself and reaffirm its relevance in this new era. Education has never been and will never be about merely training people to perform functions. The truth is that we don't need to choose between humans and machines. Instead, we must ensure that technology serves as an ally in unleashing the full potential of human beings. In this, the real danger for society does not lie with predictions of higher education's demise, but in embracing a narrow vision of humanity, where people are reduced to replaceable cogs in a digital machine.

The task ahead is, therefore, both urgent and hopeful. Universities must not limit themselves to reacting defensively to technological change. Instead, they should embrace their historical role as shapers of the future. By integrating AI into their missions with intentionality and ethical clarity, they can ensure that technology amplifies, rather than diminishes, the human capacity for critical thought, empathy and creativity. The convergence between AI and higher education is not a distant scenario; it is already unfolding. What remains is to decide whether this convergence will be guided by short-term efficiency or by a deeper vision of human flourishing and collective progress. ◆



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