# Northeastern’s president urges universities to balance AI progress with human skills in education



In an era marked by the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence, higher education institutions are at a crossroads, compelled to adapt to the needs of the 'AI Generation.' During a keynote address at the AI Synergy Summit at Johns Hopkins University, Northeastern President Joseph E. Aoun underscored the imperative for universities to emphasise lifelong experiential learning and to educate students not only about the potential but also the limitations of AI technology.

Aoun articulated a vision where universities must strive to find a balance between autonomous AI systems—termed "agentic AI"—and human agency. He believes this balance should form the crux of the educational mission moving forward. According to Aoun, “Essentially, moving forward, society, universities, and institutions will have to provide the balance between agentic AI and human agents.” This perspective comes at a time when technology's influence in academia continues to deepen, and Aoun's remarks resonate with ongoing discussions around the role of educators and institutions in shaping a balanced future.

Citing insights from his book *Robot-Proof: Higher Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, Aoun introduced the concept of "humanics." This framework integrates technological, data, and human literacy, allowing students to be versatile and adaptive in their pursuits. He remarked, “AI has an enormous limitation for the time being; AI doesn’t understand contexts.” This assertion underscores the necessity for humans to guide ethical considerations and contextual understanding in an increasingly automated world.

Northeastern's commitment to innovative educational practices is a salient feature of Aoun's address. He highlighted the university's robust experiential learning model, which includes co-operative education opportunities in 146 countries. This approach aims to equip students with real-world skills while bridging disciplines through more than 200 combined majors. Furthermore, Aoun emphasised the hiring of "professors of practice," who bring industry expertise directly into the classroom, thereby enriching the educational experience.

However, Aoun does not shy away from acknowledging the broader challenges facing higher education. He noted a certain conservatism that persists within academic circles, stating, “In higher education, we are very conservative. We want to change the world, but we don’t want to change ourselves.” He advocates for a culture of innovation rather than mere consensus, encouraging institutions to empower early adopters of new educational paradigms to lead the charge for change within the sector. “What you want is to empower the early adopters. Let them run with it,” he said, suggesting that the success of pioneering initiatives could inspire wider adoption across academia.

Moreover, the call for lifelong learning echoes a sentiment that has been prominent in higher education discourse, reinforcing the notion that re-skilling is crucial in an age where AI and automation are becoming increasingly integrated into daily work processes. Aoun has previously expressed that "becoming robot-proof is a continuous journey," which requires a commitment to cultivating human traits such as creativity, innovation, and cultural agility—skills that AI is currently unable to replicate.

In a rapidly changing technological landscape, Aoun’s insights serve as a rallying cry for educational institutions to innovate and adapt. By embracing a curricular focus that blends technical skills with human characteristics, universities like Northeastern could not only prepare students for the future but also contribute to a balanced coexistence with the advancing capabilities of AI.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://news.northeastern.edu/2025/06/04/president-aoun-ai-synergy-summit/), [[2]](https://news.northeastern.edu/2025/06/04/president-aoun-ai-synergy-summit/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://news.northeastern.edu/2025/06/04/president-aoun-ai-synergy-summit/), [[4]](https://news.northeastern.edu/2017/09/13/robot-proof-president-aoun-outlines-plan-for-reinventing-higher-ed-in-the-ai-age/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://news.northeastern.edu/2025/06/04/president-aoun-ai-synergy-summit/), [[6]](https://news.northeastern.edu/2022/05/12/a-robot-proof-journey-into-the-future-of-higher-education/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://www.forbes.com/sites/danschawbel/2017/11/24/northeastern-university-president-joseph-e-aoun-how-to-be-robot-proof/), [[3]](https://news.northeastern.edu/2018/06/04/president-aoun-becoming-robot-proof-is-a-lifelong-journey/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[7]](https://news.northeastern.edu/2016/12/07/to-architecture-students-president-aoun-underscores-shifts-in-education-toward-being-personalized-robot-proof/), [[4]](https://news.northeastern.edu/2017/09/13/robot-proof-president-aoun-outlines-plan-for-reinventing-higher-ed-in-the-ai-age/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[3]](https://news.northeastern.edu/2018/06/04/president-aoun-becoming-robot-proof-is-a-lifelong-journey/), [[6]](https://news.northeastern.edu/2022/05/12/a-robot-proof-journey-into-the-future-of-higher-education/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://news.northeastern.edu/2025/06/04/president-aoun-ai-synergy-summit/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://news.northeastern.edu/2025/06/04/president-aoun-ai-synergy-summit/> - In a keynote address at the Johns Hopkins School of Education’s AI Synergy Summit, Northeastern President Joseph E. Aoun discussed the necessity for universities to adapt to the 'AI Generation' by emphasising lifelong experiential learning and educating students on the capabilities and limitations of artificial intelligence. He highlighted the importance of balancing autonomous AI systems with human agency, a mission he believes universities should undertake. Aoun also introduced the concept of 'humanics,' integrating technological, data, and human literacy to prepare students for future challenges.
3. <https://news.northeastern.edu/2018/06/04/president-aoun-becoming-robot-proof-is-a-lifelong-journey/> - At the EmTech Next conference, President Aoun emphasised that becoming 'robot-proof' is a continuous journey, urging individuals to focus on human traits like innovation, entrepreneurship, and cultural agility to remain relevant in the age of AI. He advocated for experiential education, such as co-ops and internships, to help students develop these skills. Aoun also stressed the importance of lifelong learning, stating that re-educating and upskilling oneself is essential to avoid obsolescence in a rapidly changing technological landscape.
4. <https://news.northeastern.edu/2017/09/13/robot-proof-president-aoun-outlines-plan-for-reinventing-higher-ed-in-the-ai-age/> - In his book 'Robot-Proof: Higher Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence,' President Aoun proposes a new curriculum centred on 'humanics,' which combines technological, data, and human literacy. He argues that this approach will prepare students for a future where AI and robotics are prevalent. Aoun also highlights the importance of experiential learning, such as co-ops and internships, in providing real-world experience and preparing students for the evolving job market.
5. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danschawbel/2017/11/24/northeastern-university-president-joseph-e-aoun-how-to-be-robot-proof/> - In an interview with Forbes, President Aoun discussed the impact of AI on higher education and the role of educators and students in the future. He introduced the concept of 'humanics,' a curriculum that integrates technical skills with human traits like creativity and cultural agility. Aoun emphasised the need for experiential education and lifelong learning to prepare students for a future where AI and automation are prevalent.
6. <https://news.northeastern.edu/2022/05/12/a-robot-proof-journey-into-the-future-of-higher-education/> - President Aoun discussed the integration of humanics and experiential learning at Northeastern University, highlighting the importance of combining classroom education with real-world experiences. He emphasised the need for higher education to focus on global challenges and collaborate with partners to co-create educational programs. Aoun also cited Northeastern's ALIGN program as an example of a curriculum designed in response to industry demands for computing talent.
7. <https://news.northeastern.edu/2016/12/07/to-architecture-students-president-aoun-underscores-shifts-in-education-toward-being-personalized-robot-proof/> - President Aoun addressed architecture students, underscoring the need for a 'robot-proof' education that focuses on human traits like creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship. He discussed the importance of integrating technical skills with human qualities and emphasised the role of experiential education in developing these competencies. Aoun also highlighted the necessity for lifelong learning to adapt to the evolving technological landscape.