



THE LONDON SCHOOL  
OF ECONOMICS AND  
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■


# The road less travelled? Student choice in interdisciplinary education

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# Institutional context


- Research intensive institution specialising in the social sciences (~12,000 students)
  - Majority postgraduate population – about 40% undergraduates
  - Large international cohort – 55% UK, 45% overseas (UG)
  - Almost 50% of undergraduates are on a dual/joint degree programme (e.g., *IR and History; Environmental Policy with Economics*)
  - In general, highly prescribed UG programmes – limited selection of electives/outside options
- 

# Embedding interdisciplinarity

- Flagship interdisciplinary course, taken by all first-year undergraduates
- 2022/23 cohort – 2094 students
- Established in 2010 to bring students into the LSE tradition of ‘thinking like a social scientist’
- Framed around complex global challenges which require an interdisciplinary approach

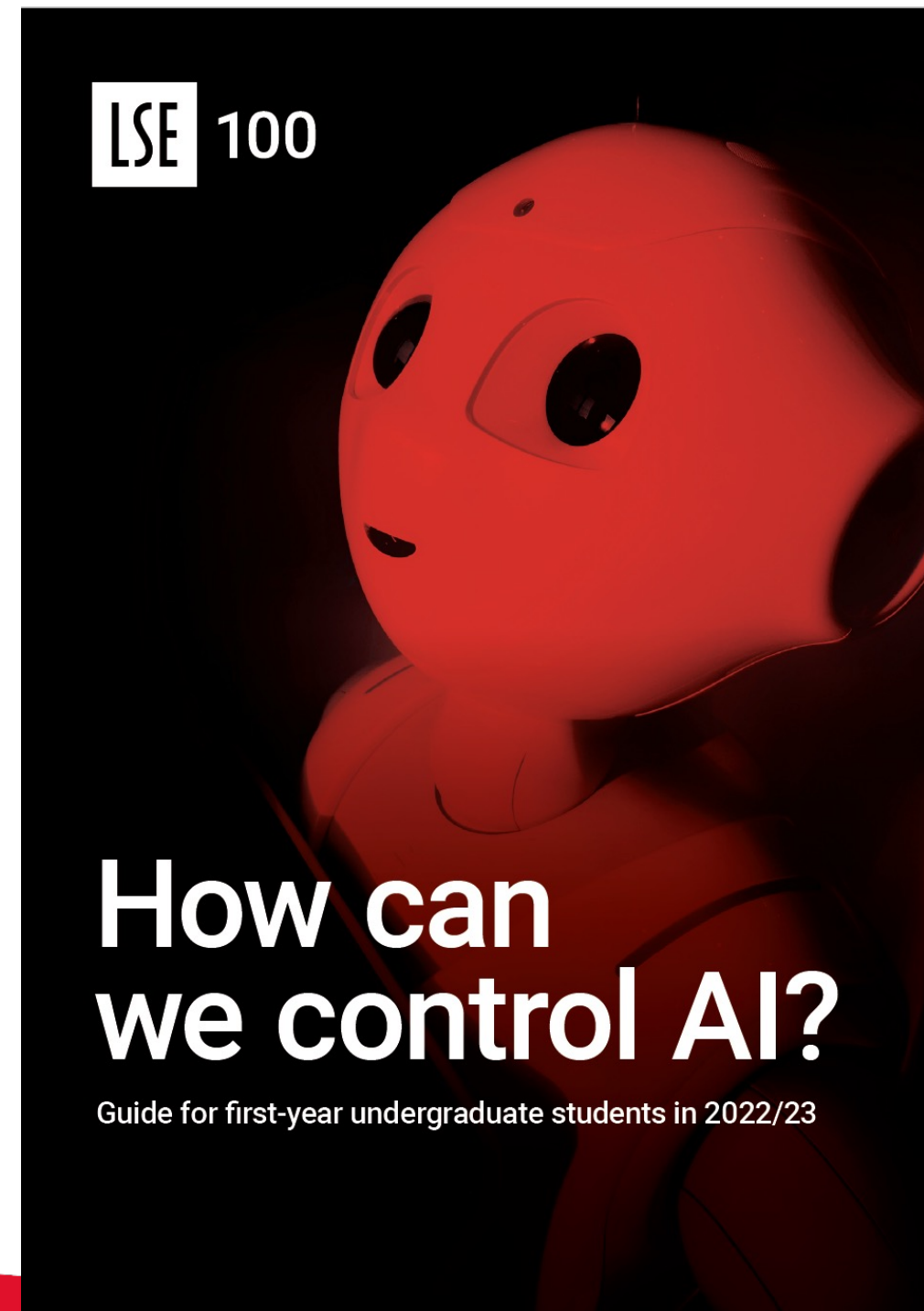


# Interdisciplinary learning in practice

- Ten **interactive, task-based seminars** across two terms
  - **Flipped classroom** format – students watch short online video lectures featuring leading academics from across the School and complete reading before seminars
  - Students are in seminars with peers from across other departments, encouraging **interdisciplinary collaboration**
  - Autumn term: **content on theme** from a range of different disciplinary perspectives
  - Winter term: interdisciplinary **group research project** – making change in a system
- 



# Introducing theme choice





# Choosing a theme

- Students were asked to choose their theme **before arriving on campus**
- A **range of material** provided on each theme
- ‘Ask the Directors’ **Zoom Q&A sessions** throughout the summer for incoming students
- All students received their **first choice** of theme – *required flexibility in the teaching team*
- **No provision for changing theme** once teaching started – *not possible to ‘shop around’*





# Choosing a theme



LSE100: How can we create a fair society?

LSE 100  
57 subscribers

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640 views 9 months ago

How can we create a fair society? As income and wealth inequality increase while gender and ethnicity gaps widen, we are increasingly asking: is this fair? How do we measure fairness? What do we owe each other, and whose responsibility is it to ensure an equitable approach? Show more



LSE100: How can we control AI?

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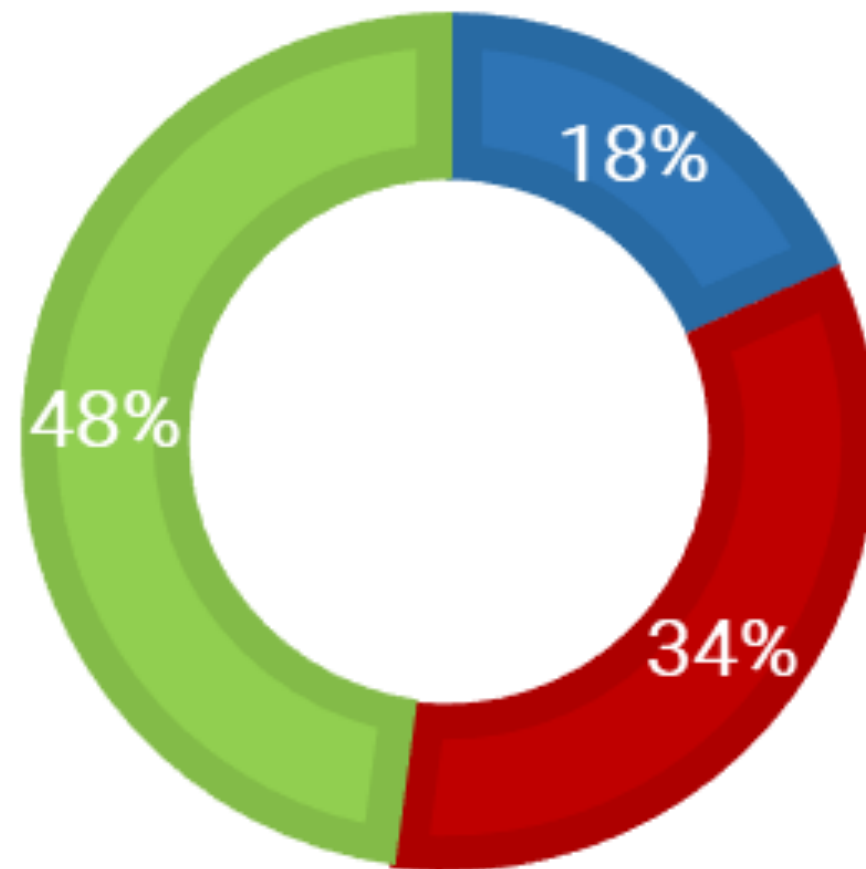
908 views Apr 29, 2022

How can we control AI? One of the three themes of LSE100 this year asks how AI is reshaping our social systems. Will AI systems replicate and reinforce human biases? Are automated decision systems objective? How will automation reshape our economy and society?

# What did students choose?

## THEME CHOICE BREAKDOWN (2022/23)

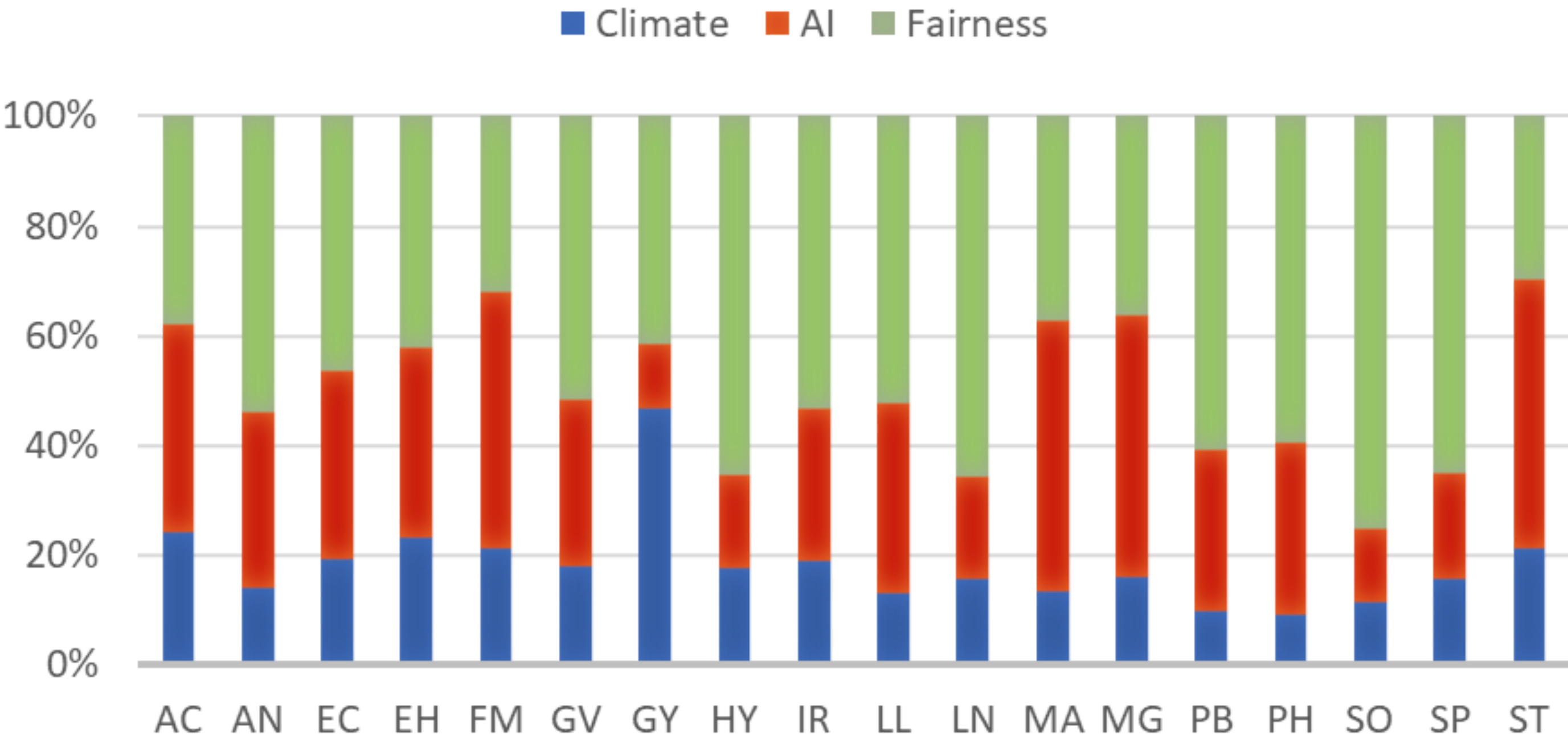
- LSE100A: How can we avert climate catastrophe? (381)
- LSE100B: How can we control AI? (707)
- LSE100C: How can we create a fair society? (1000)





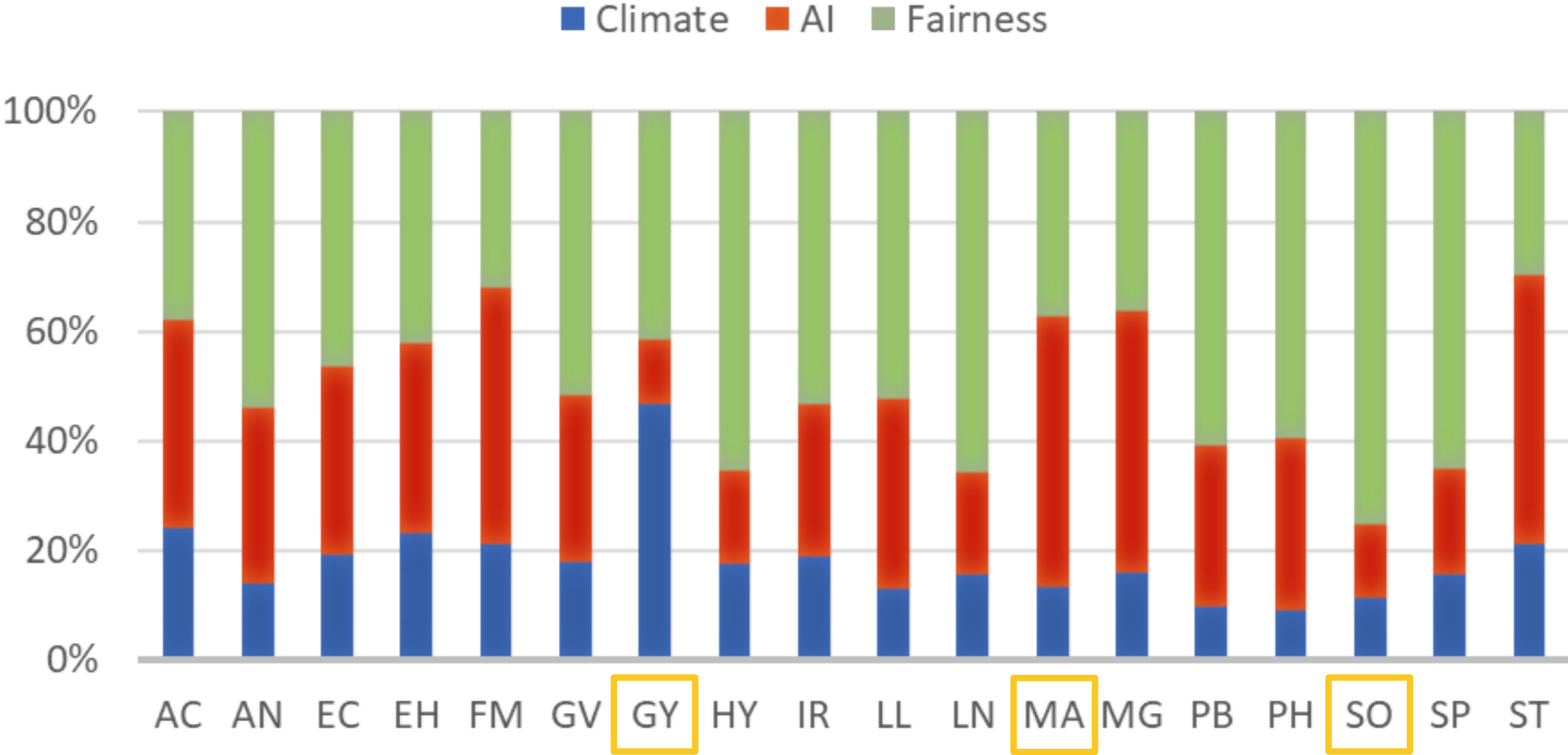
# Who chose what?

THEME CHOICE - BY DEPARTMENT



# Who chose what?

THEME CHOICE - BY DEPARTMENT



Most significant outliers:


**+29%**  
**Climate**

**+16% AI**

**+27%**  
**Fairness**



# Who chose what?

- 53% of Geography students selected a theme *other than* Climate
  - 50% of Mathematics, Statistics and Finance students selected a theme *other than* AI
  - Most divergent distributions tended to be departments which are smaller in size  
(e.g., Geography  $n=94$ , Sociology  $n=51$ )
  - Largest departments' distributions closely resembled the overall trends:
    - Economics (266 students – 19% Climate, 35% AI, 46% Fairness)
    - Law (192 students – 13% Climate, 35% AI, 52% Fairness)
    - Government (182 students – 18% Climate, 30% AI, 52% Fairness)
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# What informed students' choices?

- Limited existing literature on *interdisciplinary* course choice
- Perceptions of **difficulty** (Babad & Tayeb 2003)
- The use of **instinct** and **information from others** (Babad et al. 2004)
- Babad et al. (2004) theory of course selection: **learning values, learning styles, course difficulty**
- **Autonomous** motivation AND **extrinsic informational** motivation (Lee & Sun 2010)
- **Influence** of other students (Chang et al. 2022)





# What informed students' choices?

Three main hypotheses:

- **Personal interest**

*Prior knowledge and education, background, work and volunteer experience*

- **Professional interest**

*Career ambitions, links to required skills and expertise for jobs or internships*

- **Academic interest**

*i) Convergence with or similarity to degree, consistency, difficulty level*

*ii) Divergence from degree, desire to try something new, interest in interdisciplinarity*



# What informed students' choices?

Mixed methods approach:

1) **Trends by student characteristics**

*Programme of study, age, gender, ethnicity, UK/overseas, 'non-traditional' background, bursary status*

2) **Online survey of cohort**

*Motivations, information used to make choice, expectations*

3) **Focus groups with self-selected sample**

*Student interactions, in-person dialogue, empowering students' voices*





# Understanding course choice

- Capitalise on the benefits of offering students **pathways for learning**
- Tailoring information, materials, and course selection process in a way that enables **informed choices**
- Interdisciplinary spaces in particular may be **less familiar** for students – more difficult to make decisions
- Shaping **future course design** and curriculum development





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# Thank you!

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