

Summary report



AI Town Hall

11 December 2023

On December 11, 2023, Western hosted a town hall event on AI. This 90-minute session, with an interactive and dynamic format, was specifically designed to cultivate a rich and multifaceted conversation about the integration and influence of AI within the university community.

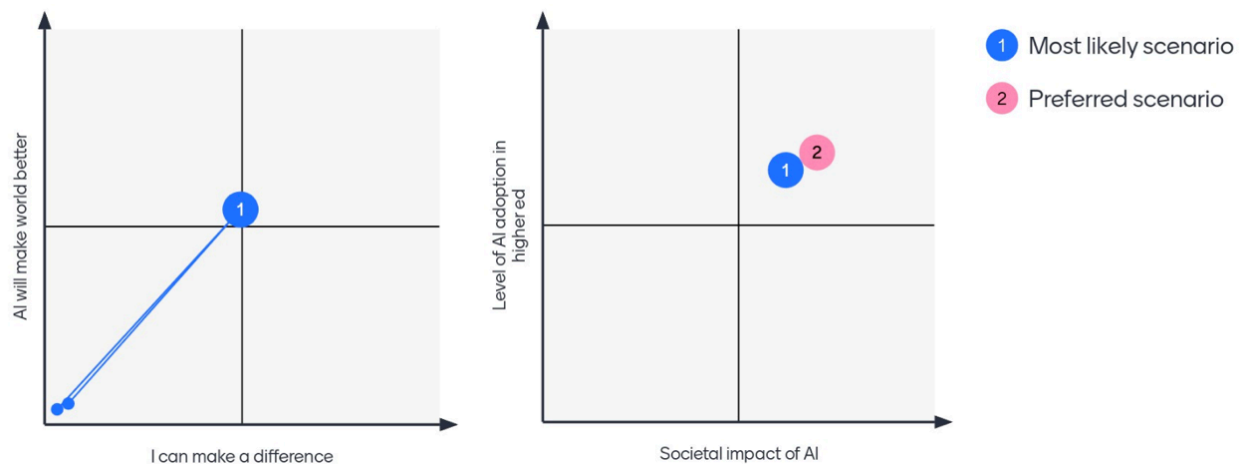
Emphasizing the significance of diverse perspectives, the event encouraged active participation from students, staff, and faculty members alike. The event aimed not only to inform but also to absorb insights from the participants, underlining the university's commitment to inclusively shaping its AI trajectory.

About the audience

Of the approximately 200 participants, half were Western staff, and a quarter each were students and faculty. The participants were surveyed on five high-level framing questions:

Participants were then asked to describe their personal sense of agency and optimism with respect to AI (see left plot below). The result was a broad range of positions, averaging to a neutral valence for the potential impact of AI on the world and modest sense of personal agency in the AI transition. We note, though, that at least two participants felt that AI’s impact will be strongly negative, while feeling no ability to influence that outcome.

Participants were further asked to undertake a ‘lightning’ strategic foresight exercise to imagine future scenarios for AI guided by a 2x2 scenario matrix with the axes **Overall societal impact of AI** and **Level of AI integration in the academy** (see right plot below). The results suggested that participants felt nontrivial impact was both likely, and desirable, as was adoption of the technology in higher education.



How do we reach the preferred future?

Participants were asked to provide free-form text outlining their advice and aspirations for the steps necessary to reach the desired “high impact/high integration” future scenario. These suggestions ranged from curriculum redesign to AI literacy and regulation by governments. To synthesize these into high-level consensus action sets, we clustered them based on their thematic relevance. This process identified key themes and groups related suggestions under each theme.

Curriculum and Education:

- This cluster emphasizes the urgent need to redesign the curriculum to incorporate AI learning. Suggestions include introducing AI-focused courses and programs to ensure students and faculty are well-versed in AI technologies.

- Participants highlighted the importance of understanding AI's workings, not just its applications. This suggests a need for foundational courses in AI and its underlying principles.
- The idea of creating small working groups in each faculty to encourage AI discussion was proposed. This would facilitate cross-disciplinary collaboration and knowledge sharing about AI.
- Suggestions also pointed towards the need for frequent course revisions and adopting new educational technologies and methodologies.
- A focus on practical application was evident, with calls for example applications and discussions on how AI can be integrated into daily academic tasks.

Ethical and Equitable Use of AI:

- Ethical AI usage was a prominent concern. Suggestions like embedding ethics in every discipline and hosting AI ethics workshops for all students reflect a desire for a university-wide commitment to ethical AI practices.
- Participants emphasized teaching ethics and equity alongside AI, indicating a need for an integrated approach to AI education that balances technical skills with ethical considerations.
- The need for guidelines on the campus-wide use of AI was also mentioned, underlining the importance of a standardized approach to ethical AI deployment.
- A participant suggested supporting informed and critical use of AI, highlighting the need for awareness about AI's biases and limitations.

Infrastructure and Access:

- Suggestions in this cluster call for significant investments in data infrastructure, indicating a need for robust technological foundations to support AI initiatives.
- Equal access to state-of-the-art LLMs (Large Language Models) and other AI tools was a recurring theme, reflecting a desire for democratizing access to advanced AI technologies.
- The concept of providing institutional subscriptions to AI tools and technologies was mentioned, suggesting a centralized approach to AI resource allocation.
- Participants also pointed out the need for training staff and faculty in AI adoption, hinting at the importance of upskilling the existing workforce to keep pace with AI advancements.

AI Integration and Application:

- This theme revolves around practical applications of AI in the academic setting. Suggestions included developing an AI teaching assistant to augment learning and support faculty.
- The integration of AI into different institutional processes was emphasized, with a call for unit-specific training tailored to various job responsibilities.
- Participants discussed the potential for AI to enhance assignments and coursework, suggesting a need to explore how AI can be used as a tool for teaching and learning.
- There was a focus on consistency and awareness of AI across campus, pointing towards the need for a unified strategy for AI integration and utilization.

Policy and Regulation:

- The need for AI literacy among governments and policymakers was highlighted. This involves educating those in power about the capabilities and implications of AI to inform better policy and regulation.
- Suggestions called for corporate and governmental regulation of AI, reflecting concerns about the unchecked growth and impact of AI technologies.
- A participant mentioned the potential advantages of not over-regulating AI, suggesting a balance between regulation and innovation.

Summary and next steps

The AI Town Hall engaged a cross-section of the campus community, laying the groundwork for a collaborative and informed approach to AI integration. The event's insights reveal a collective recognition of AI's potential and an eagerness to harness its capabilities ethically and effectively.

The survey responses underscore a nuanced understanding of AI, indicating a readiness to engage with the technology while maintaining a critical awareness of its implications.

Our next steps include continued community consultation, leveraging the identified themes to develop strategic objectives that align with the community's needs and aspirations. Building on the enthusiasm and insights from the town hall, and other engagements, Western will define and pursue objectives through internal and external partnerships, focusing on rapid but thoughtful implementation. Regular review and community feedback will be cornerstones of this ongoing process, ensuring that Western's journey with AI remains adaptable, ethical, and forward-thinking.