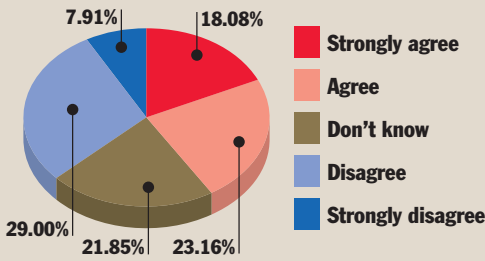
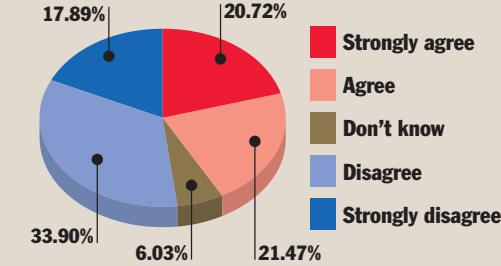


IS DUMBING DOWN TAKING PLACE? RESULTS OF OUR ONLINE POLL OF ACADEMICS

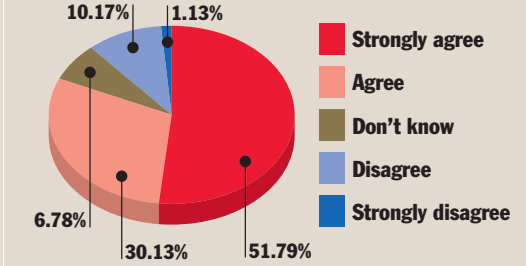
UK higher education remains the 'gold standard' internationally



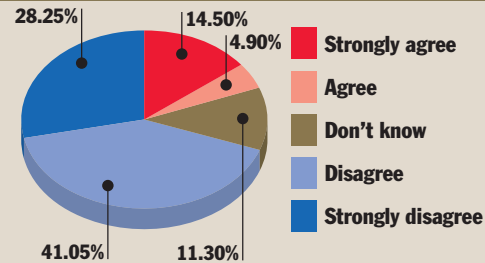
Reports that universities are 'dumbing down' are incorrect or overstated



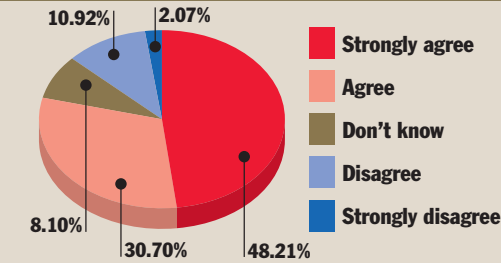
Resourcing constraints in higher education are adversely affecting academic standards



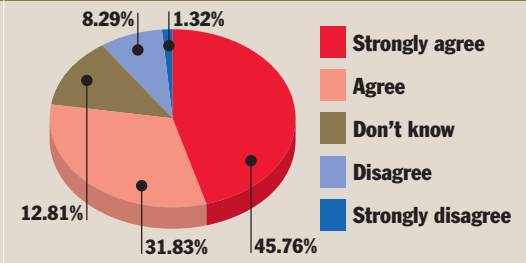
The rise in first-class and upper-second-class degrees is evidence that standards are improving



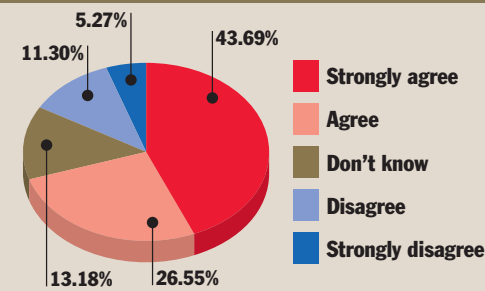
Teaching on programmes has suffered as a result of lower contact hours and larger group sizes



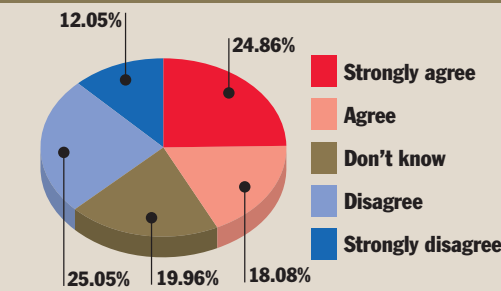
Plagiarism by students is an increasing problem in my higher education institution



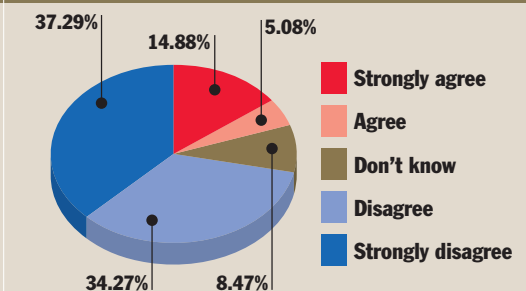
The need to maintain acceptable retention rates has led to lower failure rates on courses at my institution



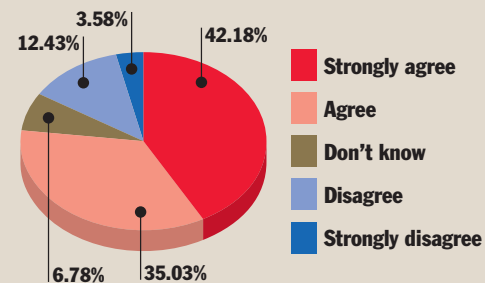
The recruitment of international students has had no adverse effect on academic standards of my institution



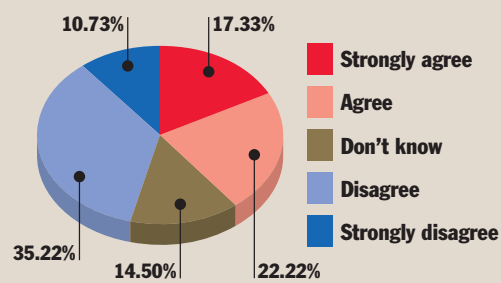
Students are better prepared for entry into higher education than they have been in the past



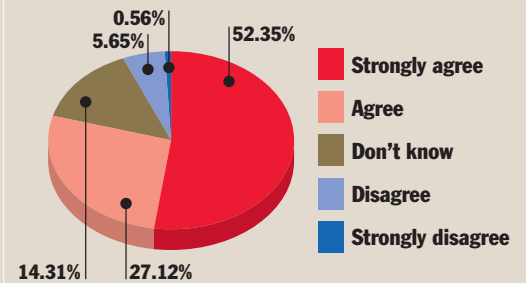
Pressure to give better marks has increased



External examiners provide protection from grade inflation



Students are taking an increasingly instrumental approach to their studies



'STANDARDS INEVITABLY CHANGE OVER TIME. WHAT IS IMPORTANT IS THAT THEY SHOULD BE RIGHT FOR TODAY'

Peter Williams,
chief executive,
Quality Assurance
Agency

Are standards in higher education going up or coming down? The question is unanswerable – indeed meaningless – for two reasons: there is no generally accepted definition of “academic standards”

and there is no baseline to use for comparisons.

Cassandras like to point to the decline of (undefined and unevidenced) academic standards as yet another sign of the country going to the dogs. Optimists, on the other hand, claim that the world has changed, the purposes of higher education have changed and the standards being

achieved by a much greater number of students each year (although perhaps different from the standards of earlier centuries) are appropriate for those new purposes.

Underlying the pessimists' argument seems to be a belief that standards should never change, although it's not at all clear when the datum line should be set. Standards in

1600? 1700? 1850? 1950? The year that I graduated? For my part, I'm not impressed by claims that standards have fallen since the 1980s or the 1990s.

What nonsense this all is. Standards will inevitably change over time, reflecting developments in the world at large. Whether they are the same as 10, 20, 30 years ago is irrelevant.

What is important is that they should be right for today, and meet the diverse needs of society as they are now. As so often, “fitness for purpose” is the most useful approach or, to put it another way, the Aristotelian approach is to be preferred to the Platonic.

Increased participation brings with it inevitable, if sometimes unacknowledged,

consequences. As higher education embraces more and more of the intellectual range of the population, it may need to redefine and expand the concept of academic standards.

Provided that it continues to recognise the very highest and most focused achievement, as well as broader and more modest, but no less valuable,

accomplishment, there is nothing wrong with that.

Are standards falling? Not the right question. Is higher education doing what it should be doing – improving the life chances of its students, offering opportunities hitherto denied to all but a few, and giving us a better chance to solve the problems of both today and tomorrow? Undoubtedly.