

Student Retention and Achievement in Higher Education: Success, Inequality and Disadvantage.

1st November 2012

De Montfort University, Leicester



**Reducing the attainment gap in HE:
Challenges and Possibilities**

Dr Gurnam Singh, Coventry University

Background – Race, Ethnicity and HE

- Phase 1 – Pre 1990 – ‘state of ignorance’ – colour blind – cultural deficit.
- Phase 2 – 1990’s – Widening participation – disproportionate numbers of BME students HE, but largely in New Universities. Emphasis on removing barriers to entry.
- Phase 3 – 2000 to present – Gradual uncovering and recognition of a ‘problem’ – evidence base gradually begins to build (Connors, et al (2003) and (2004); Law et al (2004); Tolley and Rundle, (2006); Broecke and Nicholls, (2007) HEA/ECU (2008), Fielding et al (2008) ECU (2010), NUS, (2011), Singh, (2011), HEA/ECU (2011).

Defining the problem

- ‘Relative to White students, those from every non-White ethnic group are less likely to obtain good degrees and less likely to obtain first class degrees...The odds of an Asian student being awarded a good degree were half of those of a White student being awarded a good degree, whereas the odds of a Black student being awarded a good degree were a third of those of a White student being awarded a good degree’ (Richardson, 2007: 10).

Why is the picture confusing?

- Problem with ethnic categorisation. Categories can not really tell us anything about individual experience.
- Super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007)
- Focussing on categories and student achievement/performance may actually take our attention away from 'institutional structures and pedagogical practices' (Ahmed, 2007)
- Reduces the historical struggle of justice and equality (political and pedagogical) to an endless wild goose chase for the 'absolute truth'.
- We can get lost in the numbers game.



Disparities in Student Attainment (DiSA) – HEA Funded NTF
project – Professor Glynis Cousin (Wolverhampton) and Dr Gurnam
Singh (Coventry)
www.wlv.ac.uk/disa

4 Key questions:

- **Conceptual - What do we mean by a BME student (real or statistical entity) ?**
- **Evidential - What is the nature/scale of the attainment gap (institution, department, course and module level)?**
- **Evidential - Why do BME students do less well than 'white' students i.e. how can we explain the gap in degree attainment (Folk versus evidence based explanations)?**
- **Pedagogical - What can we do to close the gap?**

DISA: Disparities in Student Attainment - HEA Funded NTF project – Prof Glynis Cousin (Wolverhampton) and Dr Gurnam Singh (Coventry) www.wlv.ac.uk/disa



Research Stream 1: Institutional Data
Identifying modules with no disparity – why?

Research Stream 2: Student Data
What students say help or impede their achievement

Research Stream 3: Action Research with Staff
Evaluation of interventions identified by staff to eradicate the gap

Research Stream 4: Dissemination
Good Degree Guide, Vox Pops, Postcards, Framework, Methodology



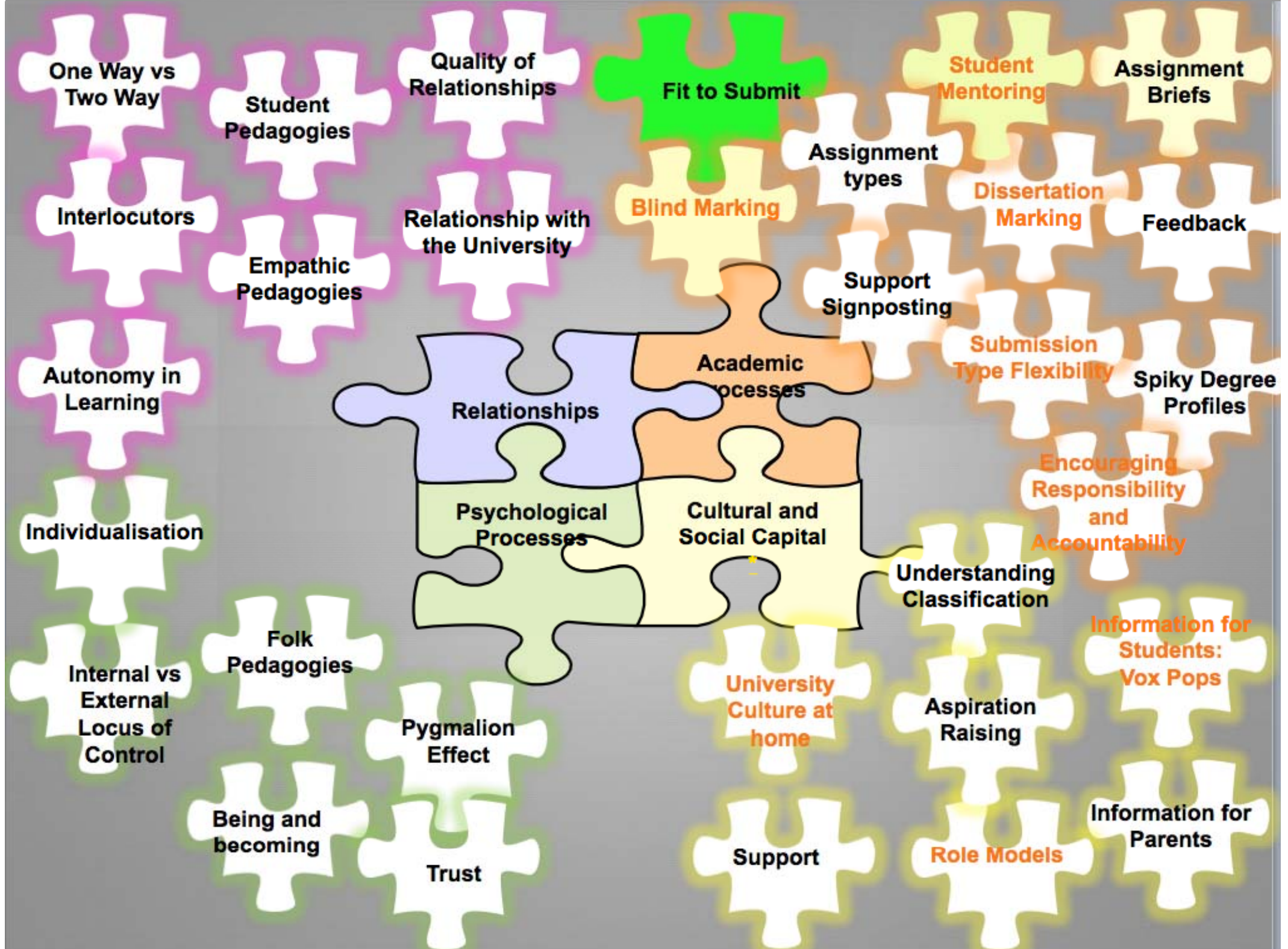
Key factors behind success

STUDENT PERCEPTION

- ESSENTIAL RELATIONSHIPS between :
 - - Staff and student
 - - Student and staff
 - - Students and University support services
- RESPECT between - lecturers and Students
- RECOGNITION of student effort
- Previous skills/Life skills
- Recognition of difficult social circumstances
- USEFUL FEEDBACK
- Access to Resources
- Fair and clear Assessment
- Academically challenging experience

LECTURERS PERCEPTION

- POOR STUDENT MOTIVATION
 - - Students don't work hard enough
 - They don't ask for help
 - They don't read assignment brief
- LOW STUDENT SELF CONFIDENCE
- Students are not willing to take risk – almost seems they are afraid to use their own ideas and thoughts
- WEAK SOCIAL/CULTURAL CAPITAL BASE
- Not enough reading knowledge of professional practice



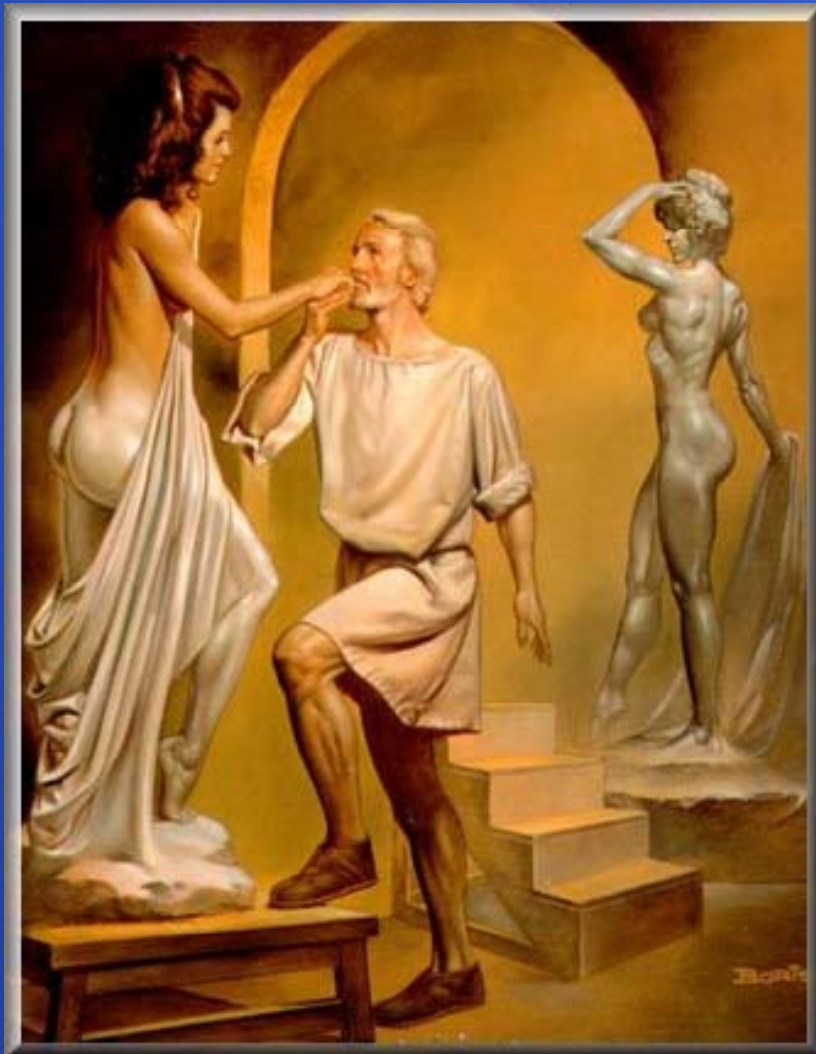
Theorising the data

- Whilst some factors might have greater effect than others, disparity is likely to be a consequence of a variety of structural, situational, individual factors.
- Solutions therefore need to be varied and targeted.
- Although one may have a romantic view of the transformative power of education, in reality there are some factors that even the best teachers in the world cannot overcome.
- For some disadvantaged students success might be about surviving!

Key structural factors

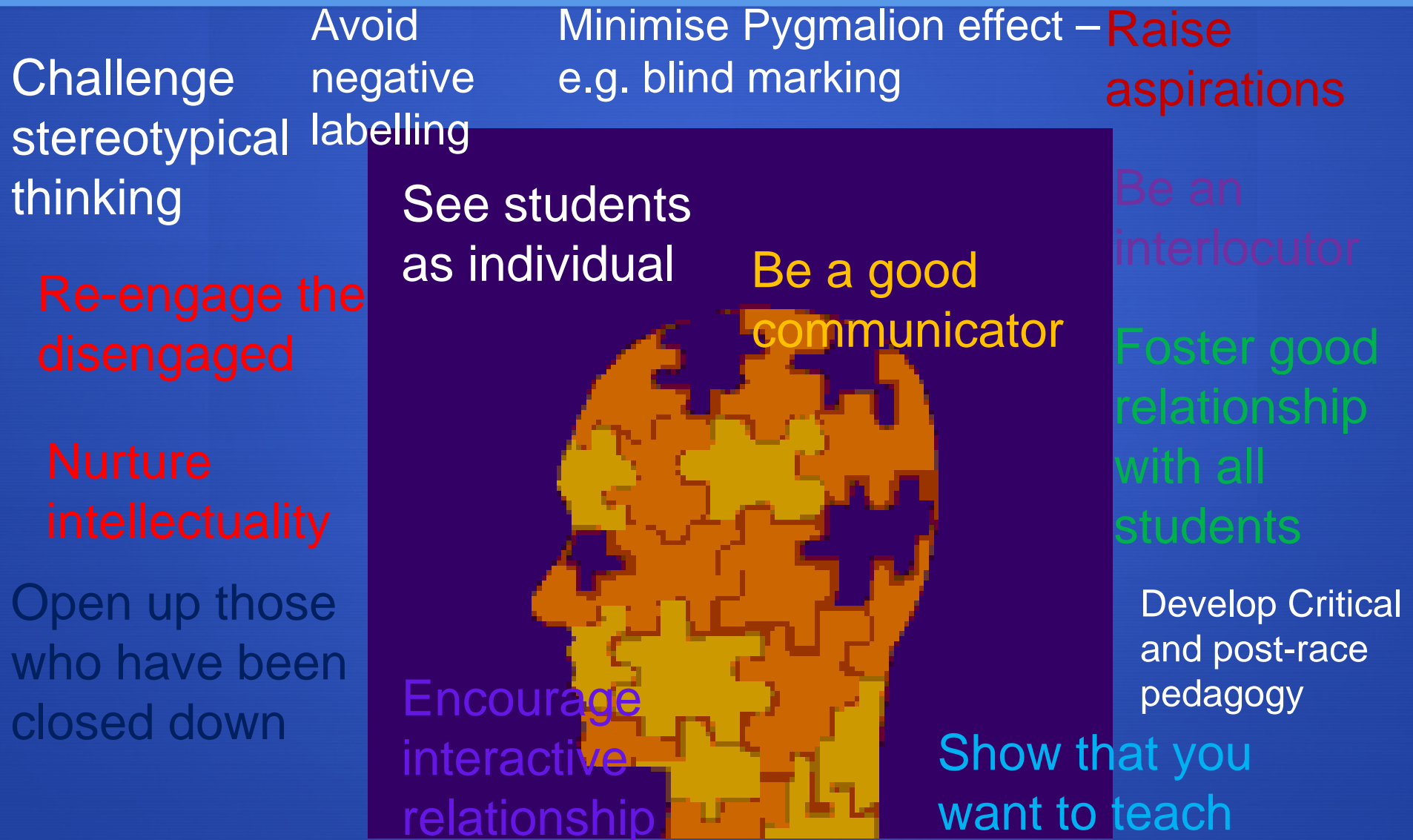
- Class origins and reproduction of human/social capital – (Bourdieu, Putnam, Halpern)
- Family and community norms and values – (Coleman)
- Ethnicity, gender and social capital – (Modood, Connor et al)
- Access to material resources and social class (Cole)
- Ideology, Racialisation, Interpelation – (Lacan, Althusser, Hall).

Pedagogy of love – Humanising learning



- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTghEXKNj7g>
- Teacher expectation impacts student performance. 4 factors
- 1. Warmer Climate – verbal and non verbal
- 2. Input factor – teachers teach more.
- 3. Response opportunity – call on and encourage high performers
- 4. Feedback – more positive and differentiated feedback

Conclusion - Facilitating the 'Good Degree Student'



Some questions

- How do we respond to the demographic shifts that render the categories increasingly unstable (Super diversity)
- We have been overwhelmed by the number of students, particularly those designated 'black' who find ethnic monitoring categories uncomfortable – what do we make of this?
- How can we engage with differences without perpetuating stereotypes or giving undue significance to 'raciological' thinking and classifications?
- Does this require an epistemological break?
 - Anti-racism to post-racism.
 - Cultural sensitivity to contextual sensitivity.