SRHE Society for Research into Higher Education

Navigating Microaggressions and EDI Initiatives: Lived Experiences of Chinese International Academics in England

Research report

January 2026

Professor Ming Cheng – Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Contents

Acknowledgements 3
Executive summary 4
Main report 5
Introduction 5
Literature review 5-6
Methodology 7-9
  Stage one: interviews 7-8
  Stage two: national survey 8
  Stage three: participatory action research webinar 8
  Data analysis 9
  Reflections on research ethis 9
Findings 9-19
  Verbal microaggressions 10-12
    Name based microaggressions 11
    Accent based microaggressions 11
    Hostile communication pattersn 12
  Behavourial microaggressions 12-13
    Cultural steoretyping 13
  Environmental microaggressions 13-15
    Systematic absence from leadership 14
    Vulnerability through junior positioning 14-15
  Responses to microaggressions 15-17
    Strategic non-confrontation 15
    Active resistance 16
    Exit planning 16-17
  Experience of EDI initiatives 17-19
    Performative diversity 17-18
    Committee work as institutional legitimation 18
    Disfunctioning reporting mechanisms 18-19
Conclusions 19
References 20-21

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Society for Research into Higher Education

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to the Society for Research into Higher Education for the Research Award that enabled me to conduct this research.

Special thanks go to Professor Rosemary Deem, my research mentor, who has provided valuable insights, advice and encouragement throughout the year I have been working on this project.

My profound gratitude goes to my colleagues, Dareen Assaf, Martin Culliney, Judith Higginson, and Sarah Ward. They provided support with literature review, data analysis, administrative assistance and project website design.

I am extremely thankful to all of the research participants who have kindly given their time to this research project. Their participation enabled me to collect useful data for this research.

Thank you, everyone!

Conference output

- Cheng, M. (2025). Navigating microaggressions: Experiences of Chinese international academics in England. *Society for Research into Higher Education Conference.* Nottingham, UK, 2-4 December 2025.

Project website

https://research.shu.ac.uk/microaggressions-in-academia/contact/

Executive summary

This project investigates Chinese international academics' encounters with microaggressions in English universities, how they navigate these workplace microaggressions, and their perceptions of institutional equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives. The work started in January 2025 and was completed in January 2026. This report focuses on the research methodology adopted by the study, and presents some of the preliminary findings.

Research methodology

The study employs a mixed-methods design, combining interviews, a national survey, and a participatory action research workshop. In-depth one-to-one interviews were conducted with 41 Chinese international academics at different career stages from four universities in England. These interviews explore the academics' lived experiences and perceptions of microaggressions at work, as well as their coping strategies and perceptions of institutional support. Based on the key findings from the interviews, an online survey was designed and administered using Qualtrics. In total, 703 Chinese international academics across England took part in the survey to share their experiences of microaggressions and their perceptions of institutional EDI initiatives and practices. A participatory action research webinar was held to engage nine participants in co-creating recommendations to improve institutional support and EDI initiatives.

Key findings

- Microaggressions against Chinese international academics are not just individual incidents in the higher education sector in England. They are a prevalent form of institutional discrimination, which creates a hostile working environment in its wake.
- 35 out of 41 interviewees (85%) had experienced or witnessed microaggressions in their workplace.
- Six main types of microaggressions are identified: verbal, behavioural, environmental, cultural stereotyping, strategic visibility, and professional undermining.
- There is limited evidence that microaggression varies by institution type and university prestige.
- Research participants adopt four main strategies to navigate microaggressions: strategic non-confrontation, active resistance, strategic visibility, and exit planning.
- Research participants have little faith in their institutional EDI initiatives and describe them as tokenistic.
- About one third of research participants plan to leave UK academia in the next five to ten years.

Main report

Introduction

This research explored the lived experiences of Chinese international academics in England who encountered microaggressions in the workplace, how they navigated and responded to the microaggressions, and their perceptions of institutional equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives. Microaggression is the focus of the study because East Asian and Black academics frequently encounter these subtle or covert forms of racial discrimination, which negatively impact their professional growth, well-being and sense of belonging (Bhopal, 2022; Kim, 2020; Rollock, 2012). Chinese international academics represent the second-largest group of international academics in the UK, with 9,490 employed in the 2022/23 academic year, most of them in England (HESA, 2024). However, there is limited empirical research exploring their experiences of microaggressions at work in England.

Literature review

Microaggressions are "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of colour" (Sue et al., 2007, p.271). Williams (2020) developed this concept further and characterised microaggressions more trenchantly as "deniable acts of racism that reinforce pathological stereotypes and inequitable social norms" (p.4) which are "caused by socially conditioned racial biases and prejudices" (p.6). These attitudes and behaviours are deeply entrenched in the dominant Western paradigms of academia. They often manifest as assumptions of lesser intelligence, treatment of others as second-class citizens, and the pathologising of minoritised academics' cultural values and communication styles (Sue et al., 2007).

Despite the growing body of research on microaggression, the concept remains an "open concept" with fuzzy boundaries and an unclear core nature (Lilienfeld, 2017), which can make it challenging to identify and address these dynamics of discrimination in practice (Sue et al., 2007). This research will therefore seek to illuminate the different types of

microaggressions experienced by Chinese international academics at work in England, the contexts in which they occur, and the other actors involved.

The work of Pierre Bourdieu informs the theoretical framework. The study will employ Bourdieu's schematic form [(habitus) (capital) + field = practice] (1990) to understand the dynamics at play in the participants' experiences. Bourdieu (1986) posits that individuals possess four forms of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. For Chinese international academics, their cultural capital (such as their educational qualifications and cultural knowledge) and social capital (including professional networks and relationships) are seen as particularly relevant in navigating their careers in England. However, the value of this capital may diminish in a context where the dominant cultural norms and practices differ from their own.

The concept of habitus, "a system of dispositions" (Bourdieu, 1990, p.53), will be used to analyse how Chinese international academics' internalised norms, values, and behaviours influence their perceptions and responses to microaggressions. The higher education sector in England (the field in Bourdieu's schema), with its power relations and structures, will be examined to understand how it contributes to the occurrence and normalisation of these interactions.

For Bourdieu (2001), microaggressions are a subtle form of violence that often goes unnoticed and unrecognised, even by those who are subjected to it. This symbolic violence exerts control and perpetuates exclusion while being marked as legitimate by the dominant cultural norms of the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). By applying Bourdieu's concepts, this study will explore how Chinese international academics' capital, habitus and field intersect, shaping their experiences of and responses to microaggressions.

Further enriching this analysis, Critical Race Theory (CRT) will be used to explicitly address the role of race and racism in these interactions of microaggression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT posits that racism is ingrained in the social fabric of institutions and practices, making it a persistent, integral feature of societal dynamics that affects minority groups disproportionately (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000). Through the CRT lens, the study will explore whether and how systemic racism shapes the experiences of Chinese international academics, influencing their access to opportunities and resources, and how it perpetuates the microaggressions they face.

Methodology

This study addresses three main research questions:

1. What types of microaggressions do Chinese international academics encounter in the workplace in England?
2. How do Chinese international academics navigate the challenges posed by microaggressions?
3. To what extent do they find their institutional EDI initiatives useful in addressing microaggressions, and how could the initiatives be improved to offer them better support?

It employs a mixed-methods design, combining interviews, a national survey, and a participatory action research workshop. There were three main stages of data collection.

Stage one: interviews

In-depth one-to-one interviews were conducted with 41 Chinese international academics at different career stages from four differently ranked universities in England. Two universities are elite research-intensive universities (pre-1992) and the other two universities are teaching-intensive. The selection of four differently ranked universities is to explore whether the experience of microaggressions varies with institutional type and prestige, a question that was informed by Bhopal's (2022) suggestion that microaggressions towards international academics are more prevalent in elite universities.

The 41 interviewees were selected from the fields of business and management, engineering and technology, and social sciences, because these programmes have large numbers of Chinese international academics (Universities UK, 2024). The recruitment criteria for the 41 interviewees were that they were: (1) ethnically Chinese; (2) foreign-born; (3) employed by the university on an academic contract for at least three years at the time of interview. Also, the selection process sought: (4) gender balance; and (5) a range of positions across professional roles and rank.

Interviewee demographics show diversity: the gender ratio is 23 females to 18 males; career stages span from postdocs to full professors; citizenship status varies, with the majority holding Chinese passports but several having British citizenship solely; disciplines cover STEM, business and management, and social sciences.

In addition, an Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) officer from each university was invited and took part in the interview to share their perspectives on EDI policy effectiveness and potential areas for improvement to better support Chinese international academics. The interview data was analysed thematically and inductively using NVivo to identify patterns and themes across participants' experiences of microaggressions, and their response to the microaggressions.

Stage two: national survey

Based on the key findings from stage one, an online national survey was designed, piloted and distributed using Qualtrics, a secure and user-friendly survey tool. It was hosted online between May and September 2025. Potential research participants were identified via their university websites, LinkedIn, and Wechat (a popular social media network among Chinese). These platforms show their names, email addresses, educational backgrounds and work experiences. The researcher invited the potential participants via emails and/or Wechat to take part in the survey.

Of the 2100 Chinese international academics from 60 universities in England who were invited to take part, 703 responded to the survey. The 60 universities have covered ancient universities, “red brick” civic universities, 1960s “glass plate” institutions, post-1992 universities and research-intensive universities. Deleting duplicate responses left a total of 626 cases. This survey further explored academics’ experiences of microaggressions in their workplaces and their perceptions of institutional EDI initiatives and practices and how these could be improved.

Stage three: participatory action research webinar

A participatory action research webinar was led by the researcher on Microsoft Teams in November 2025 to validate the key findings from stages one and two. Participatory action research was adopted because it encourages participants to actively contribute to the research process, fostering a sense of ownership of the outcomes (McIntyre, 2008).

Nine participants who had previously participated in the interviews or the survey took part in this webinar. The webinar engaged participants in co-creating recommendations to improve institutional support and EDI initiatives and help develop an action plan for implementation.

Data analysis

Quantitative and qualitative data were triangulated and analysed to identify convergences, divergences, and complementary insights across different stages. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2016) was used inductively to identify different types and contexts of microaggression, academics' approaches to dealing with microaggression, the perceived effectiveness of existing EDI initiatives, and potential areas for improvement.

Reflections on research ethics

This research project received ethics approval from Sheffield Hallam University in January 2025. The researcher considered that the topic of microaggressions might cause emotional distress for some research participants, so she took careful steps to minimise this risk. In particular, prospective participants in the interviews and the survey were given clear and detailed information about the research, including the purpose of the study, the value of participants' contributions, their right to withdraw at any time, and data protection measures taken to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality. The researcher's interactions with participants were grounded in rapport-building and empathy. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions before providing explicit consent. These approaches established participants' trust and confidence in the researcher. Many participants expressed their gratitude for being heard, which underscores the critical importance of this research.

Findings

Preliminary findings from the interviews and the survey suggest that microaggressions against Chinese international academics are prevalent across the higher education sector in England, creating a hostile working environment. When asked who had perpetrated the microaggressions, 56% of survey participants said that it was a colleague, a manager (34%), a student (30%), and administrative staff (24%). Findings suggest that

microaggressions are systematic features of the majority of the research participants' working lives rather than individual incidents.

There is limited evidence that microaggressions vary with institutional type and prestige and participant's gender. Similar proportions of the surveyed women (70%) and men (69%) reported having experienced some form of microaggresion.

Survey data suggests that younger participants were less likely than older respondents to have experienced microaggression. For example, among respondents who were under 35, 67% had faced some form of microaggression, comparable to 66% of those aged 35-44. However, the proportions rose in the two older age brackets: 79% of those aged 45-54, and 82% of those aged 55 and over. This finding suggests that the amount of time for exposure to the conditions within the English universities, and interactions with colleagues and students, was related to the experience of microaggression.

The same broad pattern emerged when considering how many years a participant had worked in UK. Among participants who had worked here for 10-plus years, the large majority (79%) had faced some type of microaggression in the workplace. The proportion was slightly lower among respondents who had worked in the UK for for 1–5 years (71%) and lower again for those here less than one year (53%).

The manifestations of discrimination described by the participants operated through verbal, behavioural, and environmental channels, linking with cultural stereotyping, institutional exclusion, and professional undermining.

Verbal microaggressions

Verbal microaggressions were the most pervasive form of discrimination, ranging from names repeatedly misspelled and mispronounced to accent-based discrimination and hostile communication patterns.

Name-based microaggressions

The persistent mispronunciation and/or misspelling of Chinese names emerged as a key form of identity erasure, affecting 71% of survey participants and described in detail by

eight interview participants. Interviewee 12, a male associate professor from an elite pre-1992 university, talked about the institutional nature of this discrimination:

> *The admin kept typing my colleague's Chinese name wrong, and every time it was a different misspelling. Even though my colleague told them 'my name is spelled this way,' the admin staff quite obviously ignored the situation*. (Interviewee 12, business studies)

Staff members' sustained carelessness and/or deliberate ignoring of name correction requests represents what Sue et al. (2007) identify as microinvalidation – communications that exclude and negate the thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person. The behaviour of the administrative staff reveals how institutional actors exercise symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2001) through the refusal to acknowledge Chinese names as legitimate markers of identity worthy of respect.

Accent-based discrimination

Fifteen interviewees experienced accent-based discrimination and described having their accents attacked and their professional competence challenged. Interviewee 21 is a senior lecturer in computing science at a pre-1992 university. He was forced by his line manager to attend English language training due to students' complaints about his Chinese accent:

> *The students, they make complaints about my accent, about the lecture delivery and I was sent to language training by my manager, which I think is inappropriate because I don't think that's a real reason.* (Interviewee 21)

According to Matsuda (1991), accent discrimination functions as a proxy for racial discrimination, allowing institutions to penalize difference while maintaining claims to meritocracy. Interviewee 21's manager did not address student prejudice; instead he legitimized that prejudice by mandating language training for the lecturer. This institutional response demonstrates how universities perpetuate racial discrimination through seemingly neutral policies.

Hostile communication patterns

Seven interviewees reported hostile communication from colleagues and managers. Interviewee 4 is a male lecturer in engineering at a pre-1992 university. He faced persistent hostile communication from his manager:

> *He would send me emails like 'It's your obligation to do something'... very demanding, not polite and sometimes kind of ironic. Sometimes he said... 'This is your reputation not attending university activities*. (Interviewee 4)

The invocation of "obligation" and threats to "reputation" reveal how power operates through official channels to enforce compliance. Applying Bourdieu's analytic framework, this represents the exercise of symbolic violence through legitimate institutional authority, where racial aggression becomes indistinguishable from normal academic hierarchy.

Behavioural microaggressions

Behavioural microaggressions affected 22 interviewees and 53.6% of survey participants. These behaviours systematically positioned Chinese international academics as technical workers rather than intellectual contributors, reflecting what Bourdieu terms "misrecognition" – where the dominated group's capital is systematically undervalued within the field.

The denial of intellectual contribution emerged as a central mechanism of professional marginalization. Interviewee 16 is a female lecturer in business studies at a research-intensive university. Her senior colleague ordered her not to make comments on the assessment of the programmes she contributed to:

> *You should not say anything about the assessment or the criteria of this lecture because that's not your responsibility. Your responsibility is just delivering the seminar along with the lecture notes*. (Interviewee 16)

This experience of being explicitly limited to mechanical delivery rather than intellectual engagement reflects what critical race theorists identify as the "perpetual foreigner" syndrome in academia (Kim, 2020), revealing how academic hierarchy intersects with

racial assumptions to limit Chinese academics' professional scope and academic freedom to make decisions on teaching and curriculum.

Cultural stereotyping

Twenty-four interviewees experienced cultural stereotyping, with particular vulnerabilities apparent at the intersection of gender and ethnicity. For example, Interviewee 15 encountered multiple conflicting stereotypes:

> *Because I look so young and female and Chinese, and then they say, 'oh, what are you studying?' I said mechanical engineering and they say 'you don't look like a mechanical engineering student.*' (Interviewee 15)

Yet she was also told:

> *One colleague of mine spoke something like 'You Chinese ladies are so bossy.' That's something I was really shocked about... he's referring to our supervisor, who is his boss.* (Interviewee 15)

This contradiction – too feminine for engineering and too aggressive in leadership – exemplifies the "double bind" (Chen & Buell, 2018) facing Asian women in Western academia. It is not only STEM disciplines where stereotyping occurs. Interviewee 6 is a female senior lecturer in social science. She faced explicit racialized aesthetic judgments by her colleagues:

> *They said to my face, in front of other British colleagues, 'because she hasn't got blue eyes and blonde hair'*. (Interviewee 6)

This reduction to physical racial markers, stated publicly as an explanation for differential treatment, reveals how racial hierarchies operate through visual injustice that position whiteness as professional excellence.

Environmental microaggressions

Environmental microaggressions manifested through institutional structures, policies, and cultural norms that systematically excluded Chinese academics from full participation at their university. Eighteen interviewees reported that Chinese academics are excluded from

senior leadership in their English universities. Concentrating most Chinese academics in junior positions creates systematic vulnerability, revealing patterns of structural rather than individual discrimination.

Systematic absence from leadership

The near-complete absence of Chinese academics from senior positions in the four universities selected for interviews created what interviewees described as a "glass ceiling" with racial characteristics. Interviewee 12's observation captures the structural reality:

> *The university management team or senior management team... we don't have any Chinese representatives... Sometimes it feels like this kind of role is quite symbolic. You're making a female or making a minority person in the role, but they may not hold the true power... the decision making is still by the white colleagues*. (Interviewee 12)

This tokenistic inclusion without genuine power reflects what Bourdieu (1996) identifies as "strategies of condescension" – where dominant groups make symbolic concessions that ultimately reinforce existing hierarchies.

Interviewee 2 described examples of active exclusion of Chinese academics from senior management:

> *We have a senior management team of four to five people. The Chinese professor was initially part of this team as PGT Education Director, but they later decided that role shouldn't be included in senior management*. (Interviewee 2)

The retroactive exclusion when Chinese academics achieve senior positions reveals how institutional structures adapt to maintain racial hierarchies.

Vulnerability through junior positioning

The concentration of Chinese academics in junior positions created systematic vulnerability. Interviewee 1 articulated the intersection of multiple marginalities when she was disrespected by her head of department’s wife who is a well known professor:

> *I am not white. I'm junior. I'm not a professor. I'm a senior lecturer and I happen to be your husband's member of staff. So what can I do? Nothing. I told myself*. (Interviewee 1)

This statement reveals how multiple forms of subordination – racial, hierarchical, and relational – compound to create positions of powerlessness. Through the lens of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), these overlapping marginalities create unique vulnerabilities that cannot be understood through single-axis frameworks.

Participants' responses to microaggressions

All research participants developed response strategies to navigate discrimination, revealing their complex negotiations between cultural values, pragmatic assessment, and survival needs. Professional vulnerability shaped the strategies, particularly in the case of early-career academics and those on probation. Three key strategies were identified from the data: non-confrontation, active resistance, and exit planning.

Strategic non-confrontation

Twenty-nine interviewees (71%) and 87% of survey participants adopted non-confrontation as their primary strategy to deal with microaggression. Among the survey participants, 64% chose to focus on their academic achievements and strengths, and 44% practised self-care and mindfulness techniques.

While strategic non-confrontation is often attributed to Confucian cultural values, further investigation revealed that this response was based on the participants' realistic assessment of risk, power relations and institutional responses. The phrase "I don't want to cause troubles" appeared explicitly in 25 interviewees' accounts, revealing deeply internalized cultural dispositions. Interviewee 1's reflection illuminates the complexity:

> *Culturally I don't want to cause any conflict. I was very angry but I don't know how to say it in a way that sounds very professional…. I also do not want to get in the wrong way with them, so I thought I'd just be quiet and said OK*. (Interviewee 1)

This stance demonstrates how habitus – embodied cultural dispositions acquired through socialization – shapes responses to discrimination (Bourdieu, 1990). The concern about

sounding "professional" and not getting "in the wrong way" also reveals pragmatic risk-assessment that the costs/punishment for raising valid grievances may outweigh the sense of justice or fairness.

Active resistance

Sixteen interviewees developed active resistance strategies, challenging both discrimination and cultural expectations of compliance. Similarly, 41% of survey partcipants referred to becoming more assertive in their communication (41%). These strategies ranged from direct confrontation to educational intervention, representing what hooks (1989) terms "talking back" – radical political gestures that challenge dominant discourse.

For example, Interviewee 35 is a female teaching fellow at a post-1992 university. She explicitly rejected the strategy of non-confrontation:

> *I'm the person. If I don't think it is right, I will also argue for myself... I think you need to speak out and this is also something I told my student from China because if they feel they're discriminated, they have to speak out. But I also tell them don't think everything is being discriminated. You should try to learn to differentiate*. (Interviewee 35)

The self-identification as "the person" who speaks out represents an identity claim to resistance. The caveat about differentiation shows sophisticated understanding of the need to choose battles strategically.

Exit planning

Research participants reported significant mental health impacts, revealing the psychological toll of navigating hostile environments. In the survey, 36% of participants had seriously considered leaving their current institution due to experiences of microaggressions, and 28% had considered leaving the UK. Similarly, 35% of interviewees had considered leaving UK academia.

Family factors and cultural belonging also strongly influenced future plans. Interviewee 5, a male postdoc, articulated the existential dimension:

> *My parents are there (China). I'm familiar with China. The sense of belonging. Yes, more like an outsider (in the UK). It's just like I work here so I stay here, but I'm not part of the society. If I go back to China, I'm part of the society*. (Interviewee 5)

The contrast between "outsider" status in the UK and being "part of society" in China reveals belonging as a fundamental human need.

Experience of EDI initiatives

Research participants were asked about their awareness and experiences of EDI initiatives in their institution. The initiatives refer to strategic actions designed to foster fair treatment, representation, and inclusion for all, including inclusive hiring, systems for reporting incidents of discrimination, staff network, mentorship, and targeted training. Of the survey respondents, 79% reported that they were aware of EDI training for staff, followed by EDI committees or working groups (55%), mentoring programmes (44%), cultural awareness events/celebrations (37%), reporting mechanisms for microaggressions (31%), and staff networks for international academics (27%).

The analysis reveals a fundamental disconnection between EDI rhetoric and lived experiences, with 37 interviewees (90%) identifying significant gaps between policy and practice. This disconnect operated through performative diversity initiatives, failed reporting mechanisms, and leadership disengagement.

Performative diversity

Twenty-nine interviewees perceived EDI initiatives as tokenistic. This performativity manifested through compulsory EDI training programmes, cultural celebrations, and committee work that created the appearance of action while maintaining discriminatory structures.

Compulsory EDI training emerged as a paradigmatic example of performative diversity. Interviewee 1's analysis reveals the contradiction:

> *There's a grand narrative. It's still politically correct, so normatively loaded which is EDI, the university bothers to purchase this kind of training materials and make it a compulsory training that make every single member of staff to watch it. But everyone*

> *is arguably now very aware of this, but what does that mean in terms of the actual policy in terms of actual reward?* (Interviewee 1)

The gap between "grand narrative" and "actual reward" exposes the training as performative – the university is seen to be taking steps to tackle discrimination but in ways that do not achieve structural change. Ahmed (2012) argues that such performative declarations allow institutions to claim commitment to diversity while maintaining discriminatory structures.

Committee work as institutional legitimation

EDI committees emerged as mechanisms for institutional legitimation rather than change. Interviewee 37, who served on an EDI committee, spoke about its true function:

> *Part of the committee's job is to help the university achieve that (Athena Swan) award because for achieving that award, you need a long report and for writing that report, you need to have evidence – empirical evidence which will drive some changes, but it takes time and the changes often come from the goal rather than they voluntarily want to change.* (Interviewee 37)

The focus on "achieving awards" rather than genuinely combating discrimination reveals how EDI was perceived as serving institutional reputation rather than marginalized communities.

Dysfunctional reporting mechanisms

Just over half of survey participants (53%) did not find their institution's EDI initiatives effective in dealing with microaggressions. Twenty-eight interviewees (68%) discussed reporting mechanisms, with overwhelming consensus that systems were structurally designed to prevent rather than address complaints. The reporting system created what participants described as "institutional impossibility", because "the formal complaint process is so long and stressful".

Repeated failures of reporting systems created profound distrust, as indicated by Interviewee 13, a female senior lecturer at a post-1992 university:

> *In the past, I would probably give more trust to them dealing with this kind of issues, but now I think there is a genuine distrust going on at the moment. So let's just say I have more trust early, previously and now with the experience my distrust grows and it would change my decision making and change my behaviour around colleagues I guess*. (Interviewee 3)

This evolution from trust to "genuine distrust" based on "experience" reveals how institutional failures teach Chinese international academics that systems protect the perpetrators and the institution rather than victims.

Conclusion

The research has identified sophisticated coping strategies adopted by the participants, ranging from strategic non-confrontation to active resistance and exit planning. These responses, which are profoundly shaped by cultural values and degrees of employment precarity in their institutions, reveal complex navigation of hostile workplace environments that exact great psychological costs.

The findings from this study reveal that microaggressions are often about institutional patterns rather than individual incidents. Despite the ubiquity of elaborate EDI policies, plans and reporting mechanisms across the universities in England, there is a large gulf between policy and action. Many participants describe the EDI initiatives, such as the systems for reporting incidents of discrimination, as “tokenistic” and “checkbox exercises” that fail to address systemic issues. This failure exposes fundamental contradictions in how English universities approach racial equity, with performative diversity standing in for structural change, and individual resilience standing in for meaningful institutional support.

These findings call for fundamental transformation in English universities so that EDI initiatives can effect real change: working better to tackle discrimination, promote academic workforce diversity, and support the wellbeing and professional flourishing of Chinese and other minoritised staff. Otherwise, universities may face a brain drain of Chinese academics in the short and long term that undermines the equality essential for academic excellence and innovation.

References

Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press.

Bhopal, K. (2022). Academics of colour in elite universities in the UK and the USA: The 'unspoken system of exclusion'. *Studies in Higher Education*, *47*(11), 2127-2137.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). Greenwood.

Bourdieu, P. (1988). *Homo academicus*. Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1996). *The state nobility: Elite schools in the field of power*. Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2001). *Masculine domination*. Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. University of Chicago Press.

Chen, G. A., & Buell, J. Y. (2018). Of models and myths: Asian (Americans) in STEM and the neoliberal racial project. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *21*(5), 607-625.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2016). (Mis)conceptualising themes, thematic analysis, and other problems with Fugard and Potts' (2015) sample-size tool for thematic analysis. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *19*(6), 739–743.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (3rd ed.). New York University Press.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139-167.

HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency). (2024). *HE Staff Data*. https://www.hesa.ac.uk

hooks, b. (1989) _____

Kim, T. (2020). The positional identities of East Asian mobile academics in UK higher education: A comparative analysis of internationalisation and equality and diversity. In *Identities and education: Comparative perspectives in times of crisis* (pp.47-70). Bloomsbury.

Lilienfeld, S. O. (2017). Microaggressions: Strong claims, inadequate evidence. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *12*(1), 138-169.

Matsuda, M. J. (1991). Voices of America: Accent, antidiscrimination law, and a jurisprudence for the last reconstruction. *The Yale Law Journal*, *100*(5), 1329-1407.

McIntyre, A. (2008). *Participatory action research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Rollock, N. (2012). Unspoken rules of engagement: Navigating racial microaggressions in the academic terrain. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *25*(5), 517-532.

Solórzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro Education*, *69*(1/2), 60-73.

Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, *62*(4), 271-286.

Universities UK. (2024). *Higher education in facts and figures 2024* https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/facts-and-stats/data-and-analysis/Documents/higher-education-facts-and-figures-2024.pdf

Williams, M. T. (2020). Microaggressions: Clarification, evidence, and impact. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *15*(1), 3-26.