# Security screening undermines UK universities' EDI proclamations

Forcing Chinese nationals to identify themselves to institutional IT systems publicly stamps them as risks to be monitored, says Hu Chao

**Published on August 3, 2026**

**Last updated August 3, 2026**

Hu Chao (/author/hu-chao)



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As July came around, the WeChat groups for outgoing students on my Chinese campus were buzzing. And a few young people who had just got their UK visas came to see me to say goodbye, excited, full of hope.

They scrolled through packing lists on their phones while asking how to survive British campus life – which they knew I had recently experienced as a visiting academic. What they really wanted to know was how to avoid wasting the hard-earned tuition fees their parents had scraped together and graduate on time.

UK universities' core "cultural product" is the promise of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Every glossy prospectus affirms this in upbeat language and carefully curated photographs of diverse faces. But I felt compelled to interrupt my students' questions about London rents and GPA requirements to offer a specific warning.

"Next month, when you open your laptop to activate your university email account," I told them, "be prepared. The question that comes up about your nationality will tear apart every promise in those prospectuses."

This is what happened to me three years ago. When I activated my UK university email, the system listed a number of countries – China, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Iran, Iraq, North Korea – whose nationals had to complete an additional declaration relating to the UK government's Academic Technology Approval Scheme (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/academic-technology-approval-scheme) (ATAS) before their accounts could be activated.

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I remember it vividly because it was the first time I realised that British institutions categorise China alongside such countries – which send very few master's or PhD students to the UK. This sudden, unsettling revelation is something I will never forget.

The government probably didn't actually want to vet art historians for national security – and my application to be affiliated with the university was clearly submitted by the art department. I suspected it was simply the lazy, risk-averse reflex of campus bureaucracy. Rather than doing the hard work of linking the login system with individual department codes, the university's IT department threw up a blunt nationality filter at the gate.

Everyone knew, it turned out, that of the blacklisted nationalities, Chinese was the only one that the security services were really focused on. Since I am a Singaporean, I did not have to click the box; the software cared only about the colour of my passport. It did not care about my work, my ethnicity or my institutional affiliation.

But I am ethnically Chinese and I work in China. And I was very conscious that rules starting with a specific nationality have a way of sliding into targeting an entire ethnicity – as evidenced, for instance, by the Japanese-American internment in the Second World War. Tomorrow, it could be students from Hong Kong, Singapore or even Thailand and Indonesia: we all look similar and while the IT system reads passports, people only see faces.

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Moreover, the whole exercise was futile. Chinese applicants are already required to go through a government ATAS review as part of their visa application – and universities do not have the capacity to conduct real security vetting of their own. The only real function of the IT system's checkbox was to institutionalise suspicion, stamping a scarlet letter on Chinese students.

As I understand it, universities have, by now, learned to be more politically correct about it, often presenting whitelists of "exempt countries" to avoid directly naming the restricted ones. Yet the underlying mechanics remain unchanged. Before students set foot in a classroom, a group of them are stamped – publicly, because the list appears to everyone on first login, from a new professor to a new janitor – as "potential security risks" simply because of their nationality.

A few days later, I asked to sit in on the induction session for incoming PhD students in the art history department, more than 80 per cent of whom were Chinese. It was warm and genuinely welcoming, and the head of the EDI department joined via video link, proudly and passionately

introducing the university's equality principles.

She told us, in the firmest possible terms, that the university would not tolerate any form of discrimination based on nationality, ethnicity, culture or identity. If we experienced it, we should seek help. So I raised my hand. If the university does not tolerate discrimination based on nationality, I asked, how do you explain the compulsory nationality-based screening in the IT system?

The warmth on screen faded into an awkward silence. She hesitated and then explained that university policies are inevitably shaped by the broader government political climate. It was a diplomatic but vague response that bypassed the real question.

I will be honest: I still carry faint guilt about that question. As someone who does not speak English as a first language, I could not find the perfect words to express both my genuine concern and my genuine gratitude. My bluntness might have made her feel personally attacked. I remain grateful for her warm introduction to the university, and the university's public commitment to EDI did make my time in the UK some of the best months of my life. I experienced the kindness of British people every day, and my affection for the country has not faded.

But guilt does not erase the facts. The systematic screening of the Chinese students who keep UK higher education financially afloat is outright discrimination and undercuts universities' loud claims to promote diversity.

Moreover, it undercuts British soft power. Universities are sacrificing decades of accumulated international goodwill for a short-term political performance of countering imaginary threats to intellectual property. And, in the process they are quietly dismantling their global and financial future.

**Hu Chao (mailto:huchao.beijing@gmail.com) is a Singaporean art historian and curator who works between China and Southeast Asia. He is currently a research fellow affiliated with the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, China.**

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