# The East & Southeast Asian Advancement Gap

How to recognise it, and where to begin.

Dr Jung Wing Wan · August 2026

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## In Short

ESEA professionals are among the most likely to be hired and least likely to be promoted. The research consistently rules out lack of ambition as an explanation.

UK reporting won't show you this in the form you'd look for. Ethnicity categories aggregate ESEA populations until the pattern averages away, and mandatory pay gap reporting will aggregate further. Look at conversion between levels rather than headcount at each and it becomes visible in national data.

The gap has three components — perceived visibility, withheld feedback, absent sponsorship. Only the first sits inside a coaching room. Being clear about that is the point of this document.

The evidence you need is your own promotion conversion rates by cohort. That analysis is usually straightforward, and is rarely run.

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## The Talent You're Already Paying For

Across the available research, East and Southeast Asian (ESEA) professionals are among the most likely to be hired and the least likely to be promoted into management and senior roles. Ascend Foundation's analysis[1] of 2013 EEO-1 data from five major Silicon Valley firms found the impact of race on executive attainment to be 3.7 times that of gender; their later analysis[2] of 2007–2015 Bay Area data put the ratio at 2.91. McKinsey's work on Asian American employees[3] reports that 52% of Asian American employees at senior manager level and above have sponsors — 10 percentage points lower than white employees — and that perceived sponsor effectiveness drops significantly at more senior levels. Catalyst's 2025 study[4] across the UK, US and Canada found most Asians (including both ESEA and South Asians) citing the absence of mentorship, sponsorship or actionable feedback as a limit on their progress. UK-specific figures, published via LSE Business Review, state 56% of

UK Asian women and 55% of men citing lack of performance feedback as a limit on advancement, 71% and 69% on absent mentorship or sponsorship[5].

The point that changes the conversation: this is not an ambition or ability problem. The same research consistently finds ESEA professionals aspire to leadership at rates equal to or higher than their peers[4]. You have already selected, paid for and developed these people. The gap is return you are not yet realising — not a risk to take or a favour to grant.

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# Why the UK Data Won't Show You This

Most of the research above is North American, so the obvious question is what the UK picture looks like. The answer is that this gap is invisible in UK national data by construction — not because it is absent, but because of how UK ethnicity data is collected and reported. That construction is worth understanding, because it is also the reason the gap persists inside individual firms.

**The strongest counter-argument to this document is a UK one, and it is worth stating first.** In Census 2021[6], 15.1% of people in the Chinese ethnic group in England and Wales were working as managers, directors or senior officials — the second highest of the nineteen ethnic groups analysed, ahead of both the White British and Indian groups. On the face of it, there is nothing here to explain.

**Three things sit underneath that number.**

**It covers one part of the population.** The census[6] reports Chinese as a distinct group. The Chinese ethnic group in England and Wales aged 16-64 numbered approximately 342,465 at Census 2021. It does not do the same for the rest of East and Southeast Asia: Vietnamese, Filipino, Thai, Malaysian, Korean and Japanese populations fall into "Other Asian" or "Any other ethnic group" alongside populations with entirely unrelated career patterns. The size of the population this document concerns is therefore not a published figure.

**It is a stock measure of a whole population, not a promotion rate inside a firm.** It counts everyone in a management-titled role at a single moment, including a substantial base of self-employment and owner-managed business. It says nothing about how a given cohort progresses through a large organisation over fifteen years.

**It is one broad category.** "Managers, directors and senior officials" spans a team leader in a mid-sized firm and a group executive at a bank. Movement at the senior end is invisible within it.

**And where senior levels are reported, they are not disaggregated at all.** The Parker Review's 2026 census[7] found ethnic minority directors holding 20% of FTSE 100 board positions, while ethnic minority representation in UK-based senior management stood at 11% in the FTSE 100 and 10% in the FTSE 250. Those figures are reported as a single "ethnic minority" aggregate.

The Parker Review[7] has already demonstrated that this aggregation hides things. Its recent reporting drew a sharp distinction between overall ethnic minority progress and the trajectory for Black professionals, warning that a company can meet the headline target of having an ethnic minority director while having very few Black individuals at board or senior executive level. That analysis was possible because someone disaggregated the data and looked.

**Nobody has done the equivalent for East and Southeast Asian professionals in the UK.** Where the census[6] uses "Asian" as a single category, ESEA populations are numerically dwarfed by South Asian ones: in England and Wales, the Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani groups together account for around 1.69 million people in employment, against 194,000 in the Chinese group — the only ESEA population identified separately. The remainder sits inside "Other Asian" and "Any other ethnic group" and cannot be counted at all.

**The aggregation is about to increase, not decrease.** UK ethnicity classification works at two levels. The detailed level has around nineteen categories, and Chinese is one of them. Above that sit five high-level groups — and Chinese is not one of those; it falls inside "Asian or Asian British." The census figure above comes from the detailed level. The census figure above comes from the detailed level. Mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting in Great Britain will operate at the high level — White; Asian or Asian British; Black, Black British, Caribbean or African; Mixed or multiple; Other ethnic groups — placing Chinese alongside South Asian populations five to ten times larger, and the rest of East and Southeast Asia across "Asian" and "Other" depending on origin. Scotland's census uses a different ethnic group classification from England and Wales, which means even within Britain you cannot compare like with like. So the one UK figure that currently offers any visibility of this population will have no equivalent in what firms are required to publish. The UK government has confirmed it will not legislate for more granular comparison, while noting that employers may disaggregate voluntarily.

**What the same census table does show.** RM104 Table 4 reports occupation by major group, so the ratio between levels can be derived. The figures that follow are my own analysis of that table. Chinese employees in England and Wales are 34.0% professionals against 19.3% for White British — a professional pipeline nearly twice as deep. They are 15.1% managers against 13.2%. Expressed as a conversion ratio, that is 45 managers for every 100 professionals in the Chinese group, against 68 for White British: roughly two-thirds the rate. Indian and Other Asian groups sit lower still, at 40 each. This is a stock measure rather than a promotion rate, and Major Group 1 includes proprietors, which if anything flatters the Chinese figure. But it is the shape of the pattern this document describes, visible in national data once you look at conversion rather than headcount. This is the Executive Parity Index[1] logic applied at manager level, since UK census data does not identify executives separately.

**The practical consequence.** Whether East and Southeast Asian professionals in your organisation are being promoted at the same rate as their peers is not a question UK national data can answer — and the coming reporting regime will make that more true, not less. The evidence exists inside your own systems: promotion conversion rates by cohort, rather than headcount by level. That analysis is usually straightforward to run, and is rarely run.

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# Why the Gap Is Hard to See — and Harder to Get Recognised

Senior leaders who sense this often struggle to get the organisation to acknowledge it. That is not resistance so much as three structural blind spots.

**It hides in aggregate data.** As set out above: the classification system averages the ESEA pattern into categories where it cannot be seen, until you calculate the ratio between levels rather than the share at each.

**It hides in the feedback that never lands.** ESEA professionals do not necessarily receive less feedback — one large analysis of workplace performance reviews found they receive more than any other group.[8] What is missing is not volume but direction: in a related study only 54% of Asian employees said they understood what was required to earn their next promotion[9]. In the UK, 56% of Asian women and 55% of Asian men reported that a lack of performance feedback had limited their advancement[5]. Experimental work on evaluator behaviour offers one explanation for how both can be true: evaluators concerned about appearing prejudiced tend to withhold the critical component while leaving the praise intact[10,11,12]. Feedback of that kind is plentiful, reads as positive, and gives the recipient nothing to act on — so nothing surfaces in performance signals until it shows up as a quiet plateau.

**It hides behind competence.** ESEA professionals are frequently strong performers, which makes it easy to assume the pipeline is healthy while promotions go elsewhere.

This document is intended to be usable in exactly that internal conversation — something you can put in front of colleagues to move from a private hunch to a shared, evidenced recognition.

# The Reporting Clock

There is a reason to start this work before the requirement lands rather than when it does.

On 25 March 2026 the government published its response to the consultation on mandatory ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting[13], confirming that it will legislate for employers with 250 or more employees. Reporting is expected to mirror the gender pay gap regime — a 5 April snapshot, publication by 4 April the following year, enforcement by the Equality and Human Rights Commission — and large employers will be required to publish action plans alongside the data. The Bill itself is still awaited, with timings yet to be announced. Commentary from major firms puts realistic commencement no earlier than 2027, with some expecting 2028[14].

Two implications for ESEA representation specifically.

**The published figure will not capture this gap.** Reporting will use standard ethnicity categories. Whatever aggregation is applied, ESEA populations in most UK firms will be too small to report separately, and the number you publish will look unremarkable while the underlying pattern continues.

**The action plan is where it becomes visible.** An action plan is a statement about what you understand and what you intend to do. Producing one from a headline figure that hides your actual pipeline problem is the position nobody wants to be in — and it is the position most firms will be in if they start the analysis when the obligation lands rather than before it.

Organisations that understand their own pipeline before the requirement commences will be writing action plans from evidence. Those that do not will be writing them from a single aggregated pay gap figure that does not show them where the problem is.

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# What the Gap Is Actually Made Of

Being precise about the components matters, because they sit in different places and move on different timescales.

## Where the gap forms, and what moves each part

One gap, three components. Each sits in a different place and moves on a different timescale.

**WITHIN AN ENGAGEMENT**

### Perceived visibility

WHERE IT SITS

The individual
A learnable behaviour

WHAT MOVES IT

Coaching. Structured contribution and self-advocacy skills.

**MEDIUM TERM**

### Withheld feedback

WHERE IT SITS

The manager relationship

WHAT MOVES IT

Equipping managers to give candid, growth-focused feedback across cultural lines.

**LONGER TERM**

### Absent sponsorship

WHERE IT SITS

The organisation

WHAT MOVES IT

Deliberate sponsorship — advocacy in rooms the professional is not in.

Only the first sits with the individual. That is where coaching works directly — and the reason it is an accessible place to begin, not the whole answer.

# How I Work

An experimental study[15] of 105 US coaches found that Black clients received *more support but less challenge* — less constructive feedback and less time on development — than otherwise identical white clients. The study did not examine ESEA clients, but the mechanism it identifies is the one I most actively guard against.

**Range is built through honest challenge, not comfort.** That is the centre of how I work, and it is the reason this document tells you plainly which components coaching can and cannot move. The willingness to have the conversation that much coaching avoids is the most useful thing I bring.

That approach is grounded in twenty-five years inside large regulated organisations and in the evidence base referenced throughout, not in generic frameworks. My original training is scientific, which is why this document is careful about what the evidence does and does not show.

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# A Practical Place to Start: Coaching

Coaching individuals and self-selecting groups is the most accessible first step, and it does two useful things at once.

**It creates immediate forward movement.** The evidence for workplace coaching is a moderate, independently replicated effect on the self-regulation and self-advocacy behaviours at the heart of visibility. Both Theeboom et al. (2014)[16] and Jones et al. (2016)[17] meta-analyses demonstrate that workplace coaching provides significant positive effects on individual and organisational outcomes, though they differ in scope and specific methodological criteria. The closest well-controlled study in this area[18] — a randomised trial of debate training — found participants roughly 12 percentage points more likely to advance into leadership roles over eighteen months, mediated by improved assertiveness, with the effect holding across ethnicity and background.

**It surfaces recognition.** A coaching cohort makes the pattern visible. As participants name what has been getting in their way, the organisation gains concrete, current evidence of the gap it has struggled to see — which is often the very thing needed to build internal support for the longer-term work.

What coaching does not do is fix the feedback and sponsorship components on its own. Presented plainly, that is an advantage: you can start now, see movement, and decide what to add — rather than commit to a large programme before the gap is even agreed.

# What Can Sit Alongside

The two structural components are best treated as distinct, optional work that can run alongside coaching as recognition grows — not as a single bundled promise.

**Manager feedback capability.** Practical training, talks, and coaching for individual leaders on giving candid, growth-focused feedback across cultural lines — the specific, actionable version of "better management," aimed directly at the withheld-feedback component.

**Sponsorship by design.** Advisory on how sponsorship, as distinct from mentoring, can be made deliberate rather than left to chance, since sponsorship is the single largest measured deficit.

**Pipeline analysis.** Establishing what your own promotion conversion rates actually look like by cohort — the evidence base everything else depends on, and the thing that will make your future action plan defensible.

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# How You Would Know It Is Working

I measure against your baseline rather than against a borrowed figure. The calculation is straightforward and it is yours to run: promotion conversion by cohort, using data you already hold. I can set out the method — which fields, which comparisons, over what period — and you can run it internally without giving me access to anything. Each organisation is different, and I hold client work in confidence, so I do not present another company's results as a proxy for yours.

**Within the engagement, three to six months.** Observable change in visibility, self-advocacy and contribution in meetings.

**Within six to twelve months.** Leading indicators: internal applications for senior roles, the quality and frequency of feedback received, patterns of contribution.

**Over eighteen months to several years.** The Executive Parity Index, developed by Ascend Foundation[1] to measure the gap between professional and executive representation, is a pipeline ratio driven by promotion cycles. A meaningful shift is a multi-year measure, and it depends on the feedback and sponsorship components, not on coaching alone.

What I commit to is the first two horizons and a baseline you can hold me to. The third depends on promotion and sponsorship decisions that remain yours — which is why the work is designed to build your organisation's capability rather than a dependency on mine.

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## Where This Leaves You

The question is not whether to commit to a programme. It is whether your own promotion data shows the pattern described here. If it does, coaching is an accessible first step that also makes the gap visible enough to build internal support for the rest. If it does not, you will have answered that question with a calculation you can run yourself.

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## A First Conversation

The natural next step is a short, exploratory call to understand where you are: how far the gap is already recognised internally, what you have tried, and what change you would most want to see. From there, a sensible first step becomes easy to define.

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# Selected Evidence

The evidence base is uneven, and deliberately so. The pattern itself is established primarily by North American research, where the data has been disaggregated and studied. The UK sections rest on primary UK sources — census data, the Parker Review, government policy documents — and on my own analysis of RM104. The absence of comparable UK research is not incidental to the argument; it is part of it.


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7. The Parker Review Committee, *FTSE 350 board and senior management census* (2026).

8. Textio (2022). *Language Bias in Performance Feedback: 2022 Data Analysis and Survey Results. Survey data collected spring 2022; document analysis of performance reviews written for more than 25,000 people across 250 organisations. Available at* explore.textio.com/feedback-bias

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