



CACI



**How Zero Gravity's
enhanced identification
model is sending
thousands of
underrepresented
students to university**



Background

Zero Gravity is a digital platform connecting low-income students in years 12 and 13 with undergraduate mentors for app-based mentoring into highly selective universities. Zero Gravity has previously worked with CACI to enrich their understanding of the backgrounds of thousands of applicants through CACI's Acorn. This is a geodemographic segmentation of the wider UK population used to assess students' socio-economic backgrounds based on their postcodes. This has enabled significant strides in the platform's mission to bridge the gap between talent and opportunity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It has also highlighted how their innovative use of profiling data and strategic partnerships helped thousands of students from low-income families gain admission to top universities, partnering with over 800 state schools across the UK.





Challenge

Matching social and economic needs with educational and career opportunities is one of the major challenges that Zero Gravity has sought to address. Every year, around 50,000 students from socially mobile backgrounds achieve top GCSEs. However, only a third of these students make it to highly selective universities, and even fewer progress into top graduate careers. This discrepancy underscores a prevalent issue: while talent is evenly distributed across socio-economic backgrounds, opportunity is not.

The underrepresentation of socially mobile talent at elite universities and in prestigious careers is not due to a lack of ability. Instead, factors such as the "Network Advantage" (the intangible advantage of having access to a broad professional network identified in Zero Gravity's Gap Zero report), resource shortages and imposter syndrome often hold these students back. The challenge for Zero Gravity is to bridge this gap, ensuring that talent from low-opportunity backgrounds can access the education and careers they deserve.

Solution

To address this challenge, Zero Gravity developed a sophisticated 'potential identification system' to identify and support socially mobile talent. A key component of this algorithm is the integration of contextual student profiling from Acorn. Insights drawn from Acorn provide a granular understanding of the socio-economic environment faced by students at home, enabling Zero Gravity to accurately evaluate their academic potential and their challenges.

By combining this information with Zero Gravity's own academic performance data, the algorithm indexes top-performing students within the bottom groups of social advantage.

This allows Zero Gravity to connect with socially mobile talent at the earliest stages of their educational journey.

By providing rich socio-economic insights, Acorn enhances the precision of Zero Gravity's talent identification process, ensuring that support is directed towards students who are not only high achieving, but also from disadvantaged backgrounds.





This collaboration allows Zero Gravity to partner with 839 state schools across the UK, effectively supporting the UK's most promising, socially mobile students.

This data-driven approach not only streamlines the identification process for employers, but also ensures that Zero Gravity's resources are maximised, offering tailored support to those who would benefit the most. These efforts help to create a more inclusive academic environment, ultimately contributing to greater social mobility and diversity within the student population.

Acorn's data also plays a crucial role in the education space for widening participation and access programmes for universities. By incorporating Acorn's geodemographic insights, universities can better understand the socio-economic barriers faced by potential applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This allows institutions to design more effective outreach and support programmes aimed at widening participation among underrepresented groups. For instance, universities can use Acorn's data to target specific regions or communities where students are less likely to apply to higher education, tailoring their access programmes to address the unique challenges these students face. Moreover, Acorn's profiling helps universities track the effectiveness of these initiatives, ensuring that resources are allocated where they can have the greatest impact.



Benefits

In the most recent academic cycle, Zero Gravity has achieved remarkable success by helping over 8,000 students from low-opportunity backgrounds secure places at top-tier universities – all free of charge – due to the social value the organisation drives. Notably, 800 of these students gained admission to Oxford and Cambridge, both of which rank among the top 10 higher education institutions globally. Additionally, Zero Gravity has launched the Zero Gravity Fund, directing nearly £1.5 million towards scholarships for its latest cohort of students.

The success of the current model has enabled Zero Gravity to focus on other opportunities to support disadvantaged students. The university mentoring platform has been such a success that they've now developed an innovative new service to help students into the workplace following graduation. Zero Gravity now pairs these young people with industry mentors and provides them with tailored support to access leading universities and, ultimately, successful careers. This enhanced approach not only equips students with the tools and guidance needed to reach their full potential but also contributes to a more diverse and inclusive talent pipeline for employers.

The impact of Zero Gravity's approach is exemplified in its flagship partnership with HSBC. Committed to recruiting socially mobile talent for their early career opportunities, HSBC partnered with Zero Gravity to access its digital community of high-potential candidates. Through this collaboration, HSBC was able to showcase its commitment to diversity and inclusion, which resonated with Zero Gravity's members.





A crucial factor in the success of these partnerships is the integration of Acorn's geodemographic data into Zero Gravity's talent identification system. By offering comprehensive insights into students' socio-economic backgrounds based on their postcodes, Acorn enables Zero Gravity to precisely identify students who, despite facing disadvantages, exhibit high academic potential. This precise identification allows Zero Gravity to provide tailored support to each student, linking them with industry mentors who can offer guidance and encouragement specifically suited to their circumstances.

By providing a robust proxy for students' socio-economic status, Acorn data enables the organisation to target its free-to-use services to those who need them most. The integration of this data into Zero Gravity's digital platform has not only streamlined the process of identifying eligible students, but has also ensured that the support provided is both relevant and impactful.





What's next?

Going forward, Zero Gravity is poised to scale its services and broaden its impact, with a vision to boost its lifetime earnings by £1bn by 2025. This ambitious goal is driven by the success of its unique talent identification algorithm, which has been instrumental in connecting high-potential students from disadvantaged backgrounds with top educational and career opportunities. Central to this algorithm's effectiveness is the continued use of Acorn.


As Zero Gravity scales its operations, maintaining access to Acorn will be crucial in sustaining the precision and efficiency of the platform's algorithm. By adapting to demographic shifts, supporting targeted resource allocation and enhancing predictive accuracy, Acorn will ensure that Zero Gravity can continue levelling the playing field for talented students across the UK.



Going forward, the platform will also be expanding its reach beyond the UK and embarking on an international pilot project, partially funded by Harvard University. This initiative marks the beginning of the platform's efforts to shape global futures.

As Zero Gravity continues to evolve, its focus remains steadfast: to identify, nurture and empower the next generation of leaders, regardless of their socio-economic background. By leveraging data, technology and strategic partnerships, Zero Gravity is setting a new standard for social mobility and educational access, both in the UK and beyond.





To find out more about how CACI can help you support your organisation, please get in touch.

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