

Gap Zero Report '22

The Network Advantage

Foreword

Talent is spread evenly, but opportunity is not. This fact of life is so embarrassingly obvious that it often goes unsaid. However, things don't have to be this way. Western societies have evolved dramatically over the past two centuries to spread opportunities more widely and open access to elite institutions.

Take my own story, for instance. I grew up in a single-parent family in a small town in West Yorkshire. I attended state schools and – despite significant barriers – was able to win a place at the University of Oxford.

One hundred years ago, that journey would've been almost impossible. At 18, I likely would've worked in one of Morley's cotton mills or down the pits in Wakefield. In 1926, only 9% of students admitted to Oxford were from state schools, and almost none were from low-income backgrounds.¹

Things have got better, yet there is still so much work to be done. We live in a country where the top earners are five times more likely to have been privately educated than the general population. And when we dig into the data, only 42% of this gap can be explained by differences in educational achievement.² There are, clearly, other forces at play.

Stagnant social mobility is not just a social problem but a huge source of untapped economic potential. How many great innovations, academic breakthroughs, and transformational leaders have been lost over the years because of the UK's uneven playing field? If we could increase social mobility to just the Western European average, GDP could be £39bn higher

by 2050.³ Social mobility is not a zero-sum game – when talent wins, everyone wins.

I founded Zero Gravity to make social mobility a reality. Since 2020, our platform has mentored over 3,000 students from low-income backgrounds into highly-selective universities, boosting the lifetime earnings of our students by £180m in the process.

We're now mentoring these students into the UK's leading graduate employers, ensuring our members are defined by their potential, not by a postcode lottery.

Zero Gravity is so effective because we've built a network of socially-mobile talent that extends all the way from school through university and into the workplace. By leveraging this ever-growing network, we have created a flywheel of mentorship, work experience, and inspiration that propels our members into top universities and careers.

Some students inherit a great network by virtue of birth; our members earn it through talent and hard work. Yet little research has been done into how networks drive access to top universities and careers. This unspoken benefit – the 'Network

Advantage' – forms the basis of our inaugural Gap Zero report.

What we hope to achieve through the Gap Zero report is a deeper understanding of the forces that have forged such a strong link between background and opportunity. History shows that while these forces are possible to overcome, they must first be understood before they can be defeated. Only then can opportunity be spread evenly in a society where talent reigns supreme.

Joe Seddon is the Founder & CEO of Zero Gravity, a tech business that unlocks the potential of low-income students by mentoring them into top universities and careers.



What is Gap Zero?

Students from the most advantaged areas of the UK are currently over six times more likely to secure a place at a highly-selective university than those from the most disadvantaged areas.⁴ While the government, universities, and employers all have a stake in eliminating this gap, at current rates of progress, it will remain for another 332 years.⁵ If nothing changes, the UK risks squandering the talent of millions of young people and further entrenching deep social divides that will fester for generations. This isn't good enough.

Gap Zero is our annual report that aims to better understand the underlying causes of this gap and to make recommendations for how the government, universities, and employers can reduce the gap to zero. Through a multi-disciplinary approach of data analysis, academic theory, and human insight, Gap Zero presents a nuanced understanding of the UK's social mobility problem and practical solutions to deal with it.

The prize of achieving Gap Zero is huge. Creating a society with equality of opportunity at its heart is good in and of itself. But the benefits of increased social mobility stretch far beyond social justice. If the UK could increase social mobility to just the Western European average, GDP would be £39bn higher by 2050.⁶ Achieving Gap Zero therefore presents a rare opportunity to create a society that is both wealthier and more equal.

Key Findings

01 64% of students from middle-class backgrounds believe their family has the knowledge to assist them with their university application, compared to just 43% of students from working-class backgrounds.

There is significant variation within the state sector when it comes to the quantity of personalised university admissions support, with students from working-class backgrounds being over twice as likely to report having received zero hours of support from their school compared to middle-class students.

02 State school students are more than twice as likely to report having no 'professionals' in their life to support their education compared to private school students.

Indeed, compared to state school students, private school students are more than twice as likely to know an accountant, four times as likely to know a lawyer, and seven times as likely to know a banker. 63% of students from working-class backgrounds report having no 'professionals' in their life to support them academically. 64% of students in Wales report the same compared to only 41% of students in the South of England.

03 A state school student is as likely to know zero people who attended either Oxford or Cambridge as a private school student is to know more than nine.

58% of working-class students don't know a single person who has studied at Oxbridge, compared to only 11% of private school students. Equally, students who reported that they had no professionals to support them academically were twice as likely to be unable to name a single Russell Group university. They were also 25% less likely to have plans to apply to highly-selective universities and 29% less likely to have ever been encouraged to apply.

04 Private school students are 18% more likely to report they want to attend a highly-selective university to 'improve their professional network of contacts' than state school students.

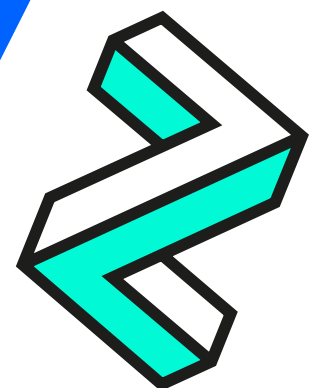
Private school students also do not consider support from their professional networks to be an unfair advantage, with 78% of privately educated students believing that an individual's chance of getting into their first-choice university is mainly based on talent and hard work, 7% more than the number of state-educated students who affirm the same proposition.

05 59% of state-educated students worry they won't have the same economic support as others, compared to just 6% of privately educated students.

State-educated students are almost four times more likely to consider giving up a place at university because of the cost of living than privately educated students. They are also more worried about feeling out of place at a Russell Group university than privately educated students, with 22% more state-educated pupils thinking they won't be able keep up academically with the other students.

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A Gap Unbridged

Over the past three decades, the UK has transitioned from a country where few attend university to a system of mass participation in higher education.

In 1997, less than one in four 25–34 year-olds possessed an undergraduate degree, and university participation was heavily skewed towards the privately educated and middle classes.⁷

However, by 2021, the number of 25–34 year-olds with an undergraduate degree had risen to 57.5%, with recent trends suggesting that university participation will continue to grow.⁸ University, far from being the preserve of the few, is now the norm for Generation Z.

Despite the huge expansion in overall university participation, the UK's most selective universities have continued to be dominated by the privately educated, and state-educated students from affluent backgrounds. Indeed, the UK's higher education landscape has become polarised between highly-selective universities such as the 24 'Russell Group' institutions, which continue to disproportionately admit students from affluent backgrounds, and the post-1992 universities that tend to be more representative of the demographic makeup of the UK. For instance, Durham University only recruits 61.6% of its undergraduates from state schools, despite state schools educating 93% of the UK's young people.⁹ Manchester Metropolitan University, on the other hand, recruits 96.4% of its students from state schools.¹⁰

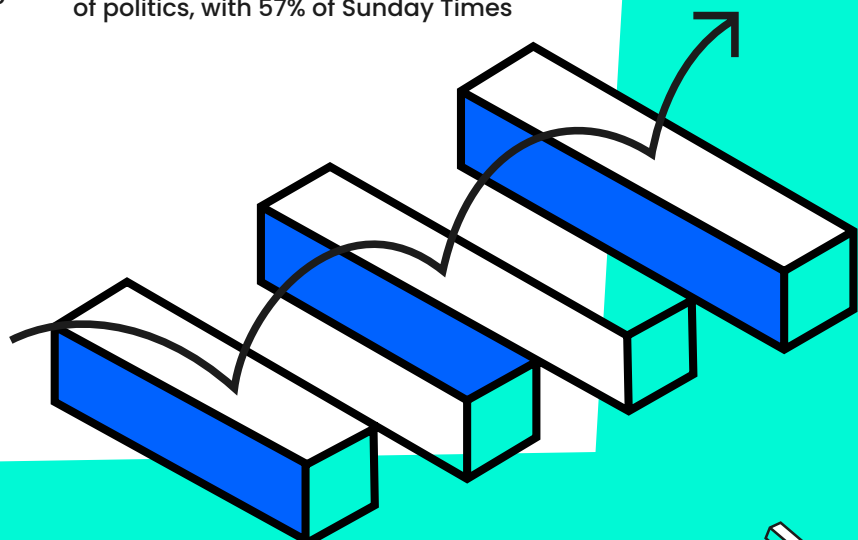
This disparity matters because the type of university a student attends is a key determinant of their economic and social outcomes.

Securing a place at a Russell Group university has been proven to increase the lifetime earnings of graduates by an average of £200,000, and this boost increases by a further £200,000 for those graduating from Oxbridge.¹¹ Despite many employers reforming recruitment practices to weaken or even totally drop degree requirements, elite graduate schemes continue to be dominated by Russell Group graduates, with 81% of legal trainees having studied at a Russell Group institution.¹² Among industries that have an outsized cultural influence such as politics, media, and the creative industries, 49% of professionals have a Russell Group degree.¹³ This is despite Russell Group universities only educating 6% of the UK population.¹⁴ As such, if Russell Group universities continue to be dominated by the privately educated and the affluent, it is highly likely that the UK's elite careers will be too.

Look no further than the make-up of the current government for evidence of this effect.

68% of the current cabinet were privately educated, the highest proportion since 1992.¹⁵

Things don't look much better outside of politics, with 57% of Sunday Times



A Gap Unbridged

Rich Listers having attended a private school, alongside 48% of FTSE 350 CEOs.¹⁶ When considered within the context that the UK's 2,000 private schools currently educate only 7% of school children, the outsized influence of private education on society is clear, with highly-selective universities providing a conveyor belt for the children of the affluent into 'the elite'.¹⁷

Academic research to date has focussed on the link between wealth and academic attainment (i.e. grades), and how this drives inequalities in university access.

The theory goes that wealthier parents invest more in the education of their children through private school fees, houses in leafy areas with top-performing state schools, and private tuition.

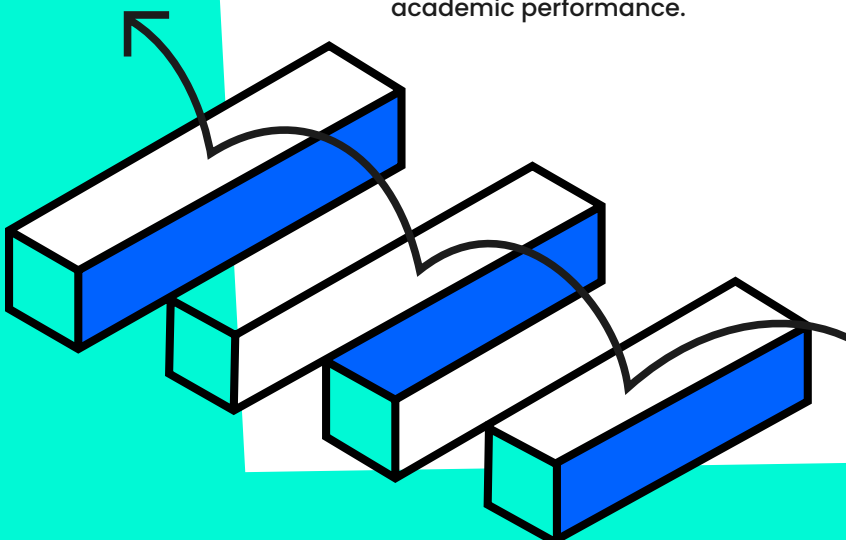
This investment then yields higher grades at both GCSE and A-Level for their children, putting them in a better position to secure top university places in a competitive admissions system that creates winners and losers on the basis of academic performance.

Data from 2019 appears to corroborate this theory with privately educated students, on average, achieving over two grades higher at GCSE than state-educated students.¹⁸ However, while differences in academic attainment clearly play a pivotal role in explaining the gap in access to highly-selective universities, they do not tell the full story.

When comparing applicants to Russell Group universities, privately educated students have a 15.3% higher chance of winning an offer than state-educated students.¹⁹

Even when controlling for A-Level grades and degree course popularity, state school students are still less likely to receive an offer compared to private school students.²⁰ This finding is made all the more stark by the fact that many of those state school students achieved their grades within the context of educational disadvantage, requiring a higher level of talent to achieve the same level of academic achievement.

Access to highly-selective universities is far from meritocratic, not only in terms of its demographically-skewed outcomes but the mechanisms through which admissions decisions are made. Understanding the factors that drive this inequality – above and beyond differences in academic attainment – will provide the focus of this report.



The Network Advantage

The story of modern society is one of the rapid growth of networks. Networks dominate every part of our lives: from how we communicate with our friends (e.g. Facebook) to how we travel around cities (e.g. Uber), order takeaway food (e.g. Deliveroo), and finance aspirational purchases (e.g. Klarna).

These network-based products have grown powerful due to the existence of 'network effects' whereby the value of a product becomes more valuable as more people use it. For instance, the more users sign up to Facebook, the more valuable Facebook becomes as a platform to connect with friends and meet new people. This feedback loop enables networks to grow at breakneck speed and entrench their incumbency against potential rivals.

Network effects are at play not just in our social lives but in our education system too.

Even as the standard of state education has improved, the UK's private schools have retained their allure, with the number of privately educated students growing by 12% over the past thirty years.²¹

One reason for this could be the value of private education as a network-based product; a means for parents to introduce their children to a broad network of fellow students, parents, and alumni. According to this theory, private school fees don't just purchase access to a better standard of education, but to a powerful network that can be leveraged throughout school, university, and then into the workplace.

Earnings data appears to lend support to this theory. A recent ONS study has found that only 42% of the gap in earnings between the wealthy and disadvantaged can be explained by differences in educational outcomes.²² This suggests that other factors – such as network effects – are at play.

It is from this base that we have identified a phenomenon called the 'Network Advantage' – the intangible advantage obtained through access to a broad professional network. We hypothesise that the more professionals a young person is exposed to from an early age, the more likely they will be aware of, apply to, and win a place at a highly-selective university.

Securing a place at a Russell Group university increases the lifetime earnings of graduates by an average of £200,000.²³ If there is a link between the size of a young person's professional network and their likelihood of winning a place at a Russell Group university, then this would not only prove the silent role of the Network Advantage in university admissions, but go some way to explaining earnings gaps between the wealthy and disadvantaged.

The Network Advantage is not dissimilar to the 'wealthy friend effect' recently discovered by researchers at Harvard University.

In the US, poor children who grow up in wealthier circles earn 20% more as adults than children who mix in less affluent communities.²⁴

Indeed, it was found that having friends from wealthier backgrounds had a greater impact on future earnings than family structure, school quality, and race. The researchers posit that the power of networks are at play.

Who you know is clearly a key determinant of economic outcomes. The question is: why?



Building a Network

In order to prove the existence of the Network Advantage, Zero Gravity commissioned a YouGov survey of 1,000 16–18 year-olds which asked students a number of questions about their professional network and their experience of the university application process.

One of the initial findings is that, in line with popular belief, the power of networks often starts at home. 64% of students from middle class backgrounds believe their family has the knowledge to assist them with their university application, compared to just 43% of students from working class backgrounds. However, this gap narrows to 8% when comparing state-educated with privately educated students, suggesting that affluence is more important than school type when it comes to direct family support.

Where private education does make a significant difference is in the size of a student's wider professional network. In our YouGov survey, state school students were more than twice as likely to report having no 'professionals' in their life to support their education compared to private school students (45% v 20%).

This difference becomes starker still when it comes to knowing certain types of professionals, as referenced in the box on the right.

These differences are further compounded by socioeconomic and regional factors. 63% of students from working-class backgrounds report having no 'professionals' in their life to support them academically. 64% of students in Wales reported the same, compared to only 41% of students in the South of England. Students in London are three times more likely to know a banker than students in the North of England, and 50% more likely to know a lawyer.

When it comes to applying to Oxbridge, students at private schools have a huge head start in terms of their network of Oxbridge alumni. Indeed, a state school student is as likely to know zero people who attended an Oxbridge university as a private school student is to know more than nine. Indeed, 58% of working-class students can't recall a single person they've met who has studied at Oxbridge.

It is clear that even before they reach university, there are notable differences in the size and breadth of students' professional networks. These differences are associated with school type, socioeconomic status, and geography, with school type in particular creating a huge gap in access to professionals in specific industries and to Oxbridge alumni.

Compared to state school students, private school students are:

7x

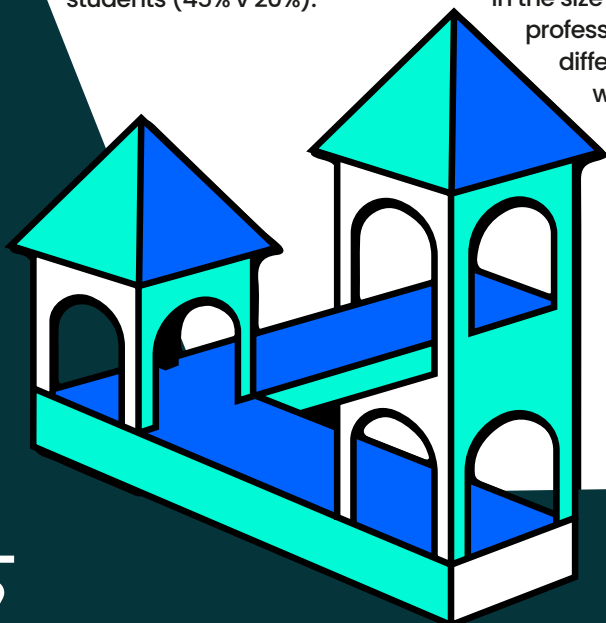
more likely to know a banker or politician

4x

more likely to know a lawyer

2x

more likely to know a doctor or an accountant



Leveraging Network Effects

Access to a network of professionals differs significantly among school students and affects students' likelihood of applying to a highly-selective university and winning a place.

Students we surveyed who reported that they had no professionals to support them academically were twice as likely to be unable to name a single Russell Group university.

These students were also 25% less likely to have plans to apply to highly-selective universities and 29% less likely to have ever been encouraged to apply.

Again, these differences were compounded by regional divides, with students in Scotland being over three times as likely to be unable to name a Russell Group university than London-based students (61% v 16%).

More concerningly still, 24% of state-educated students reported that they do not plan to attend a Russell Group university because they don't think they'll be offered a place, irrespective of being predicted the grades required to make a competitive application.

Conversely, not a single privately educated student in our survey who reported having the requisite grades to

make a competitive application to a Russell Group university cited this as a reason for not applying.

Access to a broad network is also associated with a higher quantity of personalised application support within school.

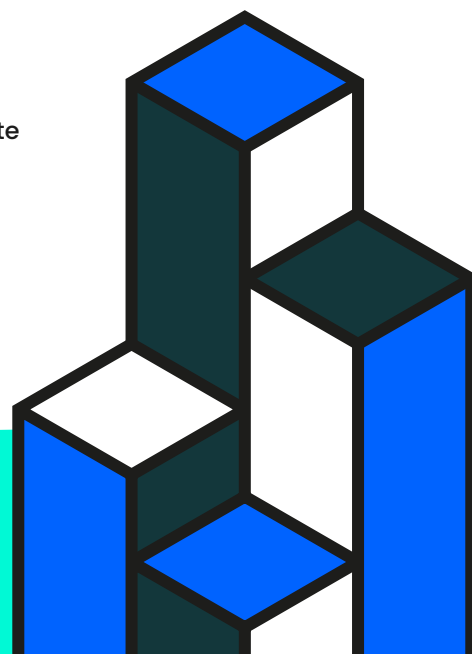
Students from working-class backgrounds are over twice as likely to report having received zero hours of individual admissions support from their school compared to middle-class students (12% v 5%).

On average, private school students receive three hours more individual support than state school students. However, this masks significant variations in the level of support within the state sector. Students attending state comprehensive schools and sixth form colleges receive an average of two to five hours of individual support with university applications, while students at grammar schools receive on average eight to 11 hours of support – higher than the private school average.

University applications to highly-selective universities tend to require a significant degree of admissions support, and it is here where the difference between the state and private sector is most stark. Students at private schools are three

times as likely to report receiving more than 15 hours of individual support with their university application compared to state school students. Indeed, a state school student is as likely to receive less than two hours of individual support as a private school student is to receive more than 15 hours (29% v 27%).

Most of this individual support however does not come from teachers. Private schools are adept at utilising alumni to support their students with university applications and hiring education consultants who have previously worked with the families of current and former students. This dynamic leads the Network Advantage to influence the quantity of individual-level support offered by schools, which then influences students' chances within the university admissions process.



The Myth of Meritocracy

58%

of private school students reported they want to 'improve their professional network'

30%

of privately educated students are anxious about their university prospects

78%

of privately educated students think that getting into their first-choice uni is based on talent and hard work

Network effects are not just powerful because they create feedback loops for further network growth but because when networks become large, they become increasingly difficult to disrupt. Take Uber, for instance. Even though you may prefer a smaller ride-hailing platform, Uber's vast network of drivers ensures lower waiting times than other platforms, incentivising both consumers and drivers to exclusively use Uber. This snuffs out competitor ride-hailing networks and disincentivises would-be competitors from entering the market because they cannot compete with Uber's network.

This anti-competitive component of the network effect appears to play out within the education sector.

When we asked students why they wanted to study at a Russell Group university, private school students were 18% more likely to report they wanted to 'improve their professional network of contacts' than state school students (58% v 40%).

In this sense, the Network Advantage is self-perpetuating. Most state school students are unaware that they are missing out on the advantage of having a broad professional network, an advantage most private school students are taught to value and nurture from a young age. The lack of a network to leverage leads many state school students to underappreciate the value of networks, throttling any impetus to build their own.

While privately educated students appreciate the value of networks, they don't tend to perceive networks as an unmeritocratic force.

78% of privately educated students believe that an individual's chance of getting into their first-choice university is mainly based on talent and hard work, 7% more than the number of state-educated students who affirm the same proposition.

Privately educated students also tend to be more anxious about their university prospects, with 30% reporting that they do not feel confident about reaching their first-choice university compared to just 21% of state-educated students.

This lack of social consciousness – regardless of private or state education – about the role of the Network Advantage entrenches the inequality.

The myth of meritocracy prevails, preventing disadvantaged students from facing up to the forces that suppress their potential, and imbuing advantaged students with a sense that they've earned their advantages. This belief causes the Network Advantage to become an unspoken truth: obvious when pointed out but left unaddressed until now.

Imposter Syndrome

The Network Advantage is further reinforced by imposter syndrome, a consequence of not having a network to mitigate feelings of self-doubt and anxieties about future competence.

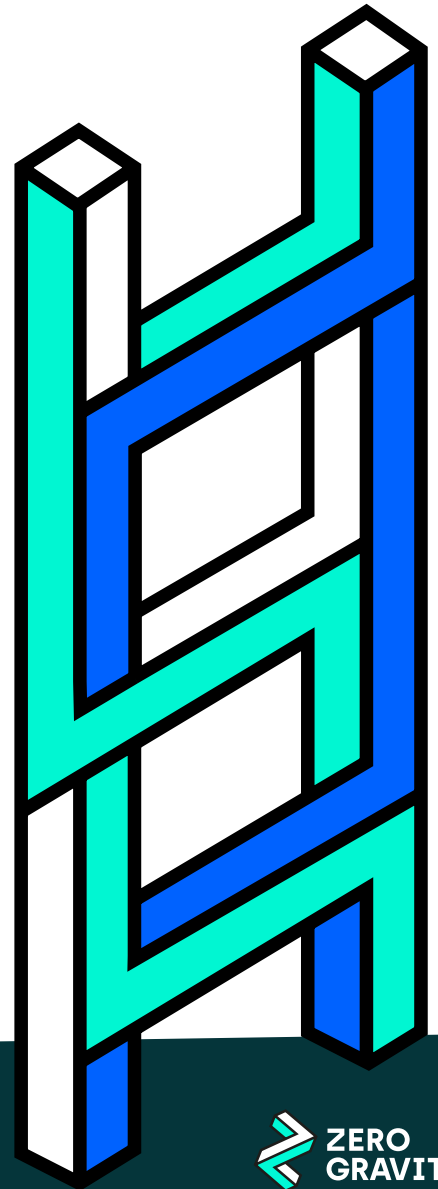
Networks drive perceptions of what university study will be like. State-educated pupils are worried about feeling out of place at a Russell Group university, but this was not a concern for the privately educated students we surveyed (33% v 0%). Indeed, 22% more state-educated pupils don't think they would keep up academically with the other students if they attended a Russell Group university (55% v 33%). When viewed through a regional lens, differences in perceptions become increasingly stark:

40% of school students surveyed in Wales would be put off applying to a Russell Group university due to worrying about feeling out of place, almost twice the number in the South of England (23%).

Imposter syndrome interacts with financial concerns to restrain network growth for lower-income students. Our YouGov survey found that 59% of state-educated students worry that they won't have the same economic support at university as others, compared to just 6% of privately educated students.

State-educated students are almost four times more likely to consider giving up a place at university because of the cost of living than privately educated students (21% v 6%).

59% of all students now work alongside their degree to fund their studies.²⁵ This disproportionately impacts state school students, with money worries making them 31% more likely to have a part-time job at university.²⁶ This reduces the amount of time state-educated students can spend building their professional networks through work experience and participating in university societies.



Conclusion: Closing the Gap

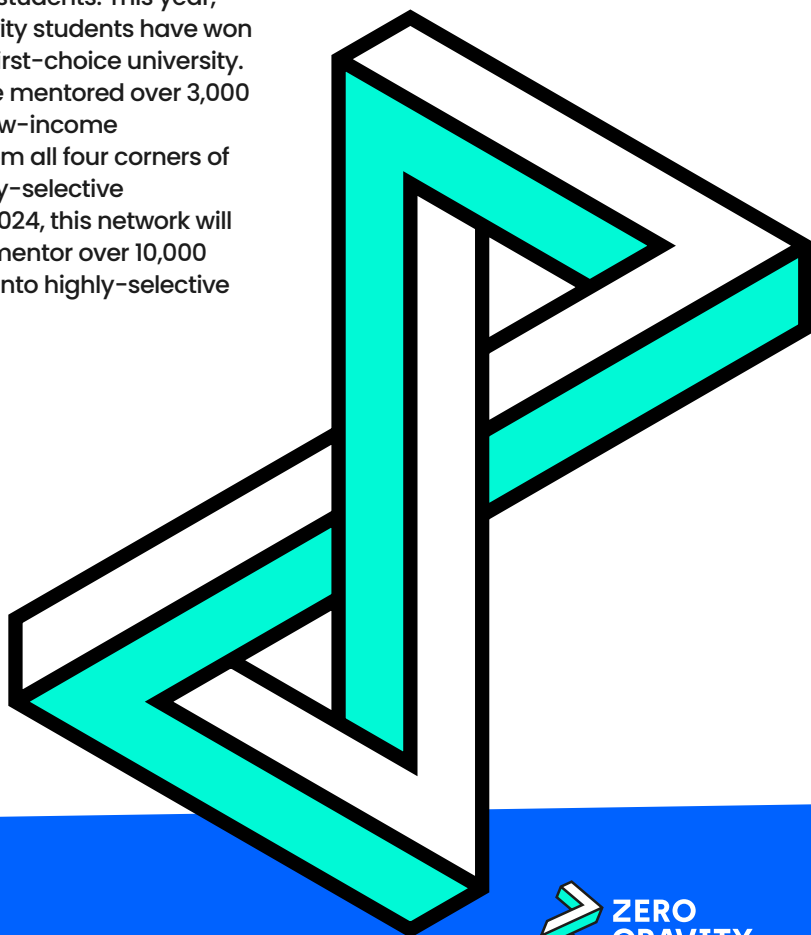
The Network Advantage has existed throughout history across all areas of society, affording an unspoken advantage to those who inherit a broad professional network. While academic research to date has analysed this advantage within the context of access to elite careers, the findings of our inaugural Gap Zero Report reveal the power of the Network Advantage in driving the gap in access to highly-selective universities too.

Whether access to a network is granted through geography, education, or socioeconomic background, school students who inherit a broad professional network receive the inside track to access highly-selective universities. And once they arrive, their upper hand grows further still. The Network Advantage becomes self-perpetuating, leading those with an extensive network to be able to extend it further still, an advantage which in turn gets passed on to their children. Meanwhile, students without strong networks are prevented from accessing the Network Advantage by imposter syndrome and financial anxieties.

It is this inequality that creates a headwind for efforts to improve social mobility. Worse still, the Network Advantage is a hidden advantage; so much so that those hindered by it are often not aware that it exists, and those that are helped do not perceive it as unjust. Until access to a professional network is no longer determined by birth, the link between background and opportunity will not be broken.

But the way things are is not the way they have to be. Zero Gravity is changing the game for those affected by this hidden disadvantage. For those with the mindset, talent and determination to make it, Zero Gravity is leveraging the power of technology to build a network of high-potential, socially-mobile students. This year, 78% of Zero Gravity students have won a place at their first-choice university. To date, we have mentored over 3,000 students from low-income backgrounds from all four corners of the UK into highly-selective universities. By 2024, this network will be extended to mentor over 10,000 students a year into highly-selective universities.

The Zero Gravity community is a network built on the virtues of talent and hard work rather than those of birth. It has the ability to turn individual achievement into community inspiration, empowering thousands of students to unlock their potential. This is how the Network Advantage will be turned on its head. By affording the advantage of networks to all, we will ensure that wherever talent is, opportunity will follow.



Recommendations

FOR SCHOOLS

01 Build an engaged alumni community and take a proactive approach to growing students' networks.

Our findings highlight the huge gap in access to a professional network between state and private schools. State schools can bridge this gap by building an engaged alumni community and recruiting recent alumni to support students in the university admissions process. State schools should also be more proactive about partnering with universities and employers who can open up their professional networks to students. Zero Gravity is democratising access to the university and careers ecosystem for state school students via our network of undergraduate and career mentors, offering an accelerated solution for state schools to boost the academic and professional networks of their students.

FOR UNIVERSITIES

02 Target career and networking opportunities at socially-mobile students.

University careers departments need to consider the impact of professional networks when offering careers support to students. The Network Advantage means that students do not start university on a level playing field. Students from socially-mobile backgrounds should be offered advice and practical support on network building, as well as targeted opportunities to connect with employers and build their professional networks. One way to achieve this is to partner with organisations like Zero Gravity that connect socially-mobile students with employers and provide tailored mentorship, content, and careers coaching.

FOR UNIVERSITIES

03 Improve means-tested financial support to facilitate network building.

Without improved financial support for low-income students, the Network Advantage will continue to be reinforced at university. Those who rely on part-time employment to fund their studies will miss out on invaluable network building opportunities and the chance to gain relevant work experience for their future career path. Universities need to increase the level of financial support offered to low-income students through means-tested grant funding and ensure those grants increase in line with inflation. Universities should also do more to promote scholarship opportunities such as the Zero Gravity Fund, which has deployed over £800,000 of scholarships to low-income students over the past 12 months.

FOR EMPLOYERS

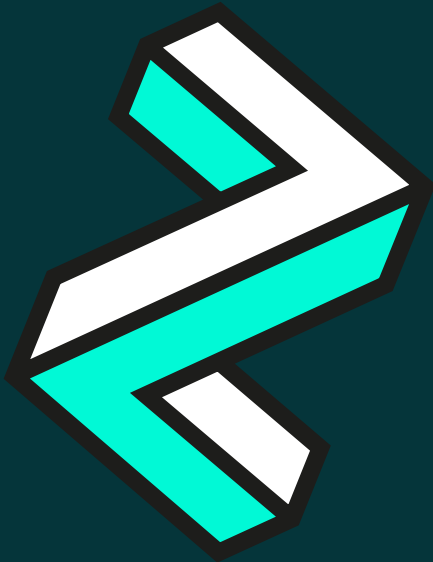
04 Pipeline candidates before university and target support at socially-mobile students.

Employers should work closely with state school students in areas of low opportunity to ensure that professional connections and work experience opportunities are not the preserve of students with pre-existing networks. This means utilising digital systems to reach and engage students living outside urban hubs and in areas of rural isolation. Employers must be proactive in engaging with socially mobile talent throughout their journey from school to university and not rely on students to reach their recruitment processes. Zero Gravity partners with employers to mentor students from socially mobile backgrounds into internship and graduate roles, all through a digital platform that reaches students across all four corners of the UK.

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