

CUSTOMER SUCCESS STORY



University of
St Andrews

Acorn's powerful
demographic
segmentation provides
robust evidence based
insight into the needs
and demands of students
entering Higher Education

CACI

DO AMAZING
THINGS WITH DATA

A photograph of several students walking on a university campus. In the foreground, a young man with curly hair, wearing a white t-shirt and a grey backpack, is smiling and talking to a young woman with long dark hair, wearing a white button-down shirt and glasses. They are both holding notebooks. In the background, other students are walking, including a man in a yellow t-shirt and a woman in a plaid shirt. The setting appears to be a paved walkway with buildings and greenery in the background.

Highlights

- Postcode, Household and Health & Wellbeing Data
- UK-wide demographic data
- Annually updated data
- Compatible integration into internal systems and software
- Over 800 variables to understand the UK's behavioural attributes

About the University of St Andrews

St Andrews, on the east coast of Scotland, is a unique and captivating place, and the University is a key part of its charm. Founded in 1413, the University of St Andrews is known for its rich history as well as cutting-edge teaching and research. More than 10,000 students attend the University, including around 8,000 undergraduates from Scotland, the rest of the UK and overseas. St Andrews is consistently ranked in the top 3 UK universities and the first in Scotland.

The challenge

Widening access to students from Scotland and the rest of the UK

Jonathan McDougall-Bagnall is the Planning Innovation and Infrastructure Manager at the University. He explains: “The data project is part of our Contextual Admissions Policy launched several years ago. We are constantly striving to widen access to our institution and ensuring that it remains accessible to all. Historically we have used SIMD (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation) data and school performance data to identify candidates in Scotland who may require the support of our contextual admissions policy. We wanted to widen this to applicants from around the UK and needed to find suitable equivalent data. Each UK country calculates their index in a slightly different way, so we couldn’t make a direct comparison.

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We also needed more than the SIMD data could give us in relation to rural postcodes. There are not enough households in some of these to provide reliable demographic data within the SIMD model, so we had some gaps in our insight

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The solution

Consistent, UK-wide demographic data from Acorn

The St Andrews team researched the data sources available and concluded that Acorn was the most comprehensive, accurate and current dataset for their needs.

“We use the Acorn postcode database as an integral part of our decision making system, to help us determine which candidates come from areas of deprivation,” says Jonathan. “We have the database and the profiler software, though we mainly use the database directly. The data is simply structured and easy to use, it comes in the same format every year. It’s very straightforward to pull into our systems, because of the consistent format and quality.

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Acorn is refreshed annually, which is great for us. There's a huge amount of change at the moment in terms of areas that are thriving or declining, in Scotland and around the UK. With Acorn we can see the true, current picture of a candidate's background demographics.

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The benefits

Context and fairness for every St Andrews applicant

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Using Acorn allows us to treat all of our UK cohort the same, rather than using each government's slightly different statistical models. It's a fair, uniform measure, affirms Jonathan.

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Joanna Fry, Access Manager: Widening Access & Transitions, says, “Our admissions system includes codes attributed to socio-economic deprivation and other widening access criteria, drawn from Acorn data and other sources.

“Both the admissions team and our academic colleagues can now look at students in groups and compare peer groups of those with similar access codes. This gives us vital context to benchmark students from similar environments and circumstances. For example, it can help us interpret the range of exams they've taken; the candidate's school may not have a wide range of subjects on offer. It also can help us understand how personal statements and references are written, depending on the influences and level of support that a candidate may have had.

“When you add it all together, this gives us a lot of context for reading each candidate's entire application, including grades and statements. We can take a fair and balanced view, with an understanding of factors that are outside the control of applicants.”

Jonathan adds: “Some people might think that using elements of automated data risks dehumanising the access process, by tagging people in a postcode bucket. In fact, the opposite is true: this enables a human, personal relationship. The data provides context for us to assess applicants individually and with a direct understanding of their backgrounds. It's helping us create an inclusive environment for high potential students who typically might not choose St Andrews.”



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We want students with the best potential; the Acorn data helps us identify potential that goes beyond certified grades. We have plenty of evidence to show that students can do extremely well even from constrained academic and teaching backgrounds. If we understand the area and school that candidates come from, alongside their grades, we have a much clearer picture of their ability to perform.

Joanna Fry, Access Manager: Widening Access & Transitions,
University of St Andrews

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

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