

Legitimizing and justifying what is done in access agreements:

The role of evidence-based practice throughout the whole student lifecycle

Jon Rainford, Staffordshire University
[@jonrainford](https://twitter.com/jonrainford)

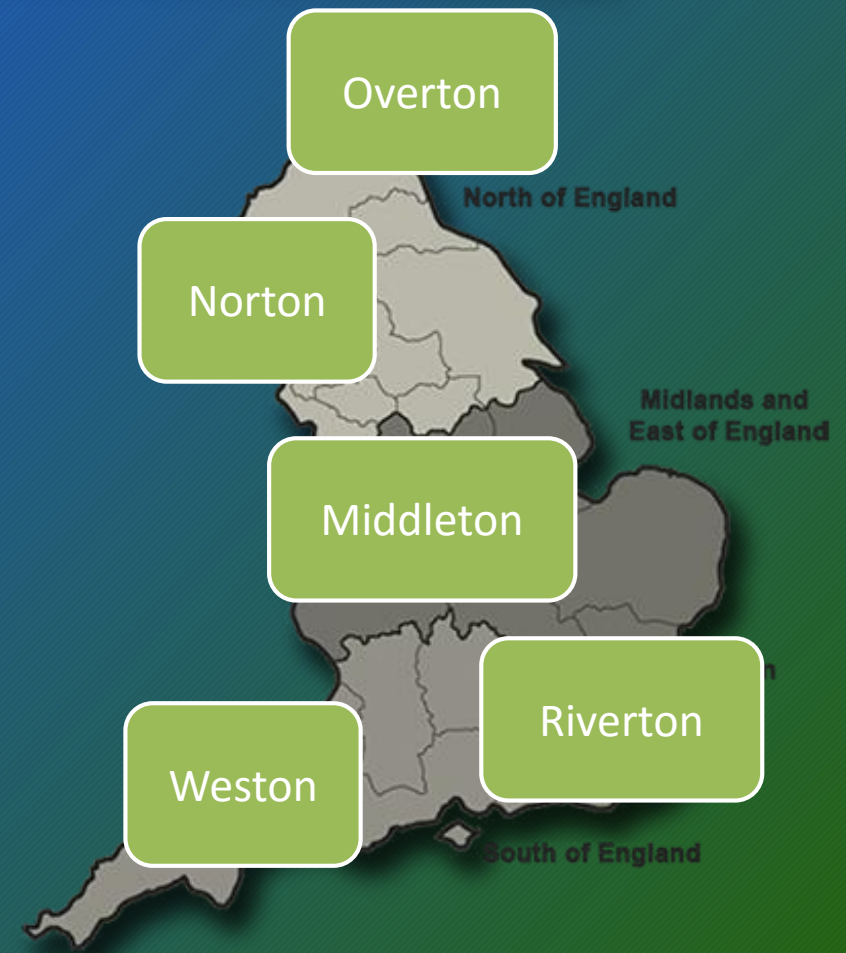
What are the drivers?

- ministerial guidance setting increasingly challenging goals for 2020, the 'further, faster change' (OFFA 2016:1)
- 'a strong evidence base is crucial to making further and faster progress.' (OFFA 2016:5)
- 2016-17 access agreement guidance:
 - You should base your decisions on access agreement expenditure on appropriate levels of evaluation of your access activities and other institutions' evidence of what works best.



Sample and methodology

- Ten institutions
- Five towns and cities in England
- Matched pairs of pre-1992 / post-1992 institutions
- **2 stage project**
- Phase 1: Discourse Analysis
- Phase 2: Interviews with widening participation practitioners and managers



Evaluation through the lifecycle

Pre-entry

- Pre-event evaluations
- Post-event evaluations
 - Teacher's Surveys
 - Parental Survey
- Local HE progression data
- Evaluation of collaborations
- Post event de-brief sessions
- Learner Tracking / HEAT
 - Comparative studies
 - Applicant data
- Small scale qualitative studies
 - Progression data
 - Learner data

Current Students

- Analysis of HESA entry data
- Analysis of Retention data
 - Withdrawal data
- Analysis of early leaver data
- Bursaries and Scholarships Surveys
- Student income and expenditure survey
- Research with ITT trainees
- Ambassador focus groups
 - Learning analytics
- Learning gain measures
 - Completion rates
- Joint research on bursaries

Graduates

- Analysis of DLHE data
- Analysis of degree classification
 - Questionnaires
 - Focus groups
- Progression data to postgraduate courses

Smarter more evidence based spend

investing in smarter, more evidence based spend and investing in the activities that we feel will have most impact in assisting us to reach our benchmarks – such as enhanced outreach activity, expanding our geographical reach
– New Overton

Recently undertaken an internal survey of bursary holders
- Old Riverton

We did a survey...



Challenges of self-evaluation

- Lack of critical distance
- Confirmation bias
- Correlation or causation?
- Who is doing this work?
- Lack of need for rigor or transparency



Commissioning research and evaluation

- Being done in at least one institution in my sample
 - Internal or External?
- Transparency

The University also commissions independent evaluation and research on issues, initiatives and new developments, and outcomes are reported to OFFA as part of the annual monitoring processes.
- New Overton

HEAT and the role of external tools

- Higher Education Access Tracker
 - Used by 9 out of the 10 institutions examined
 - Treated in different ways 'tracking tool' or 'comprehensive long-term evaluation'
 - Lack of nuance from 'engagements' alone, without critical distance can lead to correlation / causation errors
- Increased National focus on evaluation
- Future possibilities for more qualitative data collection
 - Role of standardised questions

Increasing evaluative skills

- What are we actually evaluating?
 - Impact?
 - Effectiveness?
 - Enjoyment?
- Role of NEON
 - Practitioners Training
 - Going beyond evaluation leads



Conclusions

- Evaluation and evidence-based policy if focus
- Currently a variable range of evaluation used
- Issues of transparency

- Role of third parties such as HEAT and NEON
 - Training
 - Peer-evaluation
 - Other ideas?