

FEEDBACK ON
“A NIGHT ON THE BOOKS”
THE INTERIM EVALUATION OF BUILD IT

For:

The People and Work Unit

By:

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1.0. The Feedback Report

This brief report aims to validate and enhance the interim evaluation of the Build It project by providing feedback on key dimensions of the interim evaluation. In particular, it aims to critically assess the methodology and ensure that the findings are validated by the research. It also comments on the clarity of the report, how well it puts the key findings across and makes other comments or suggestions that may be helpful.

2.0. The Validation Process

The validation process took place in four stages, this report representing the fourth and final stage.

Stage One: Alain Thomas (the external evaluator) met with Duncan Holtom, and Rhodri Bowen of the People and Work Unit to review the methodology proposed for the evaluation and to ensure it was fit for purpose.

Stage Two: The external evaluator and a colleague carried out two focus group interviews (one with Build It Team Leaders, and one with apprentices) to achieve some triangulation of researcher and to gain a first hand impression of the project.

Stage Three: the external evaluator reviews and comments upon the interim report and People and Work Unit staff make the amendments to the report suggested by the external evaluator

Stage Four: (this stage), the external evaluator endorses the final report and signs off the final version of this feedback report.

3.0. The Methodology of the Interim Evaluation.

3.1. Process

The report describes the project as an “action research” project that works by testing out theories in practice, reflecting upon what happened and then using this understanding to develop both practice and knowledge (Pp13-14).

The methodology draws largely upon the knowledge of project workers supplemented by fieldwork in the form of semi-structured one to one interviews and focus group interviews. The interviews involved project staff, apprentices and partner agencies (P3)

The main researchers were Duncan Holtom and Rhodri Bowen, staff of the People and Work Unit. However, as noted previously, two focus-group interviews (one with staff and one with apprentices) were also carried out by the external evaluator assisted by a colleague.

3.1.Potential weaknesses

An obvious potential weakness is that this is an internal evaluation that could be accused of subjectivity. However the process of external validation of which this report forms a part is intended to address this.

The report acknowledges that it is based on information from a small number of respondents (P15). However the report is clear that it’s authority does not rest on representativeness but rather on depth.

When evidence is limited the report acknowledges this and addresses the problem in two ways. Firstly, it seeks to compensate by drawing more heavily upon the literature (PP75-78 sections 11.5 11.6 and 11.8). In the case of one specific point however this is not satisfactory and here the report explicitly acknowledges the weakness and does not put too much weight on the evidence (P76 section 11.7 dealing with “the ripple effect”).

The report also acknowledges that its findings are contextual (Pp14-15) namely that it seeks to understand the lives of the young people within their locality. The weakness is therefore that the realities of the young people and the findings that derive from them may not be transferable to other localities. However the report also argues that this potential limitation is reduced by reviewing findings within the broader literature. In fact the confrontation between, theory, findings from published material and the empirical reality uncovered by the research constitutes a key strength of the methodology (see below).

3.2. Strengths

The report does not claim to establish a baseline against which to measure progress made by the apprentices. However a similar function is achieved by sections 1.3 and 1.4. Section 1.3. describes the high levels of deprivation in the communities where the apprentices live. Section 1.4. lists the generally very low levels of qualifications achieved by the apprentices prior to their involvement with Build It. These sections provide some sort of marker against which the progress made by the apprentices may be measured.

The report makes reference to a wide range of published material. This obviously enriches the context and adds academic credibility. The material is also used in a more dynamic way and this will be described later.

The report points out that project staff (the team leaders) had built strong relationships of trust with the apprentices over a period of several years (P14). This allowed the team leaders access to “a rich seam of biographies”. The report notes that the level of access is similar to that achieved through ethnographic research. This quasi-ethnographic approach adds a great deal of depth and richness to the findings.

There is good triangulation of method source and researcher.

Triangulation of method is achieved through the quasi-ethnographic approach of the team leaders, the semi-structured one to one and focus group interviews, and the extensive review of the relevant literature.

Triangulation of source is achieved by including the team leaders, the apprentices and some representatives of partner agencies in the research.

Some triangulation of researcher is achieved through the interviews carried out by the external evaluator and a colleague to complement those carried out by People and Work Unit staff.

The study tries to quantify qualitative findings to some extent. For example it tries to indicate how many people commented on a particular issue noting that more weight should be given to issues identified by a greater number of participants. It also makes use of a three point graded scale (high, medium and low) to assess apprentices' progress against a range of criteria.

The study was conducted over an 18 month period. The report acknowledges this was out of necessity (P19). However the relatively lengthy time period was also advantageous to the research in that it allowed some changes in emotional intelligence to be observed. For example the report notes how team leaders had not noted any increase in empathy on the part of trainees in 2005, yet in 2006 the external evaluator found some evidence of this (Pp29-29).

The report describes the use of "participant validation" (P18). A first draft report was presented to project managers in April 2006 and to apprentices in May 2006. This resulted generally in an endorsement of the draft findings and added further valuable detail.

As noted previously a key strength of the study is its action research approach, the way it confronts findings from empirical research with theory and findings from published material. This allows the study to develop knowledge through a process of continual reflection and analysis carried out over a period of time. For example sections 4.2. and 4.3. outline the soft skills that the apprentices had identified as being necessary to gain employment. The study compares these with a first typology of soft skills (Dawson et al 2000) but finds this wanting. A second typology (Goleman 1995), is then tested against the empirical findings and this is a better match. The latter is therefore used as a conceptual framework to structure the findings of the research. This approach is repeated in later sections notably section six which deals with the development of human capital and the identification of risk and protective factors.

3.3. Conclusions

The main weaknesses and strengths of the methodology are summarised in tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1. Main weaknesses and compensating factors

Weaknesses	Compensating factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal evaluation 	External validation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small number of participants 	Acknowledgement that the authority of the report rests on other factors.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At times limited evidence 	Extensive literature review
	Not putting too much weight on the evidence.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contextual findings 	<p>Extensive literature review</p> <p>Confrontation between empirical findings and theory or published material.</p>
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Table 2. Main strengths

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Context of deprivation and evidence of limited qualifications provides a partial baseline from which progress may be measured. • Extensive literature review. • Strong relationships of trust between team leaders and apprentices allow a quasi-ethnographic approach that generates a good depth of findings. • Good triangulation of method and source, and some triangulation of researcher. • Some quantifying of qualitative findings. • 18 month time period of study allows some changes in emotional intelligence to be observed. • Effective use of participant validation • The action research approach that confronts findings from empirical research with theory and findings from published material allows the study to develop knowledge through a process of continual reflection and analysis.

The study has relatively few weaknesses. In all cases, these are acknowledged or compensated for.

The study has a number of strengths: the depth generated by the quasi-ethnographic approach, the broad range of published material referenced by the study and the dynamic confrontation between empirical findings and that published material are particular strengths.

There is good reason to be confident therefore that the findings will be valid and that the insights will be relevant in a broader context.

4.0. Final comments on the content of the Interim Evaluation

The report is well constructed. The analysis is clear, and logically developed. The findings are well argued and well evidenced. The conclusions and recommendations follow logically from the findings. The report's depth, insights and conceptual development make it an impressive and powerful piece of work.