

ENHANCING STAFF WEEK ORGANISATION THROUGH SERVICE ACTION RESEARCH

O. Polyakova

Universitat Politècnica de València (SPAIN)

Abstract

In the past few years, considerable research efforts have been directed towards establishing collaborative and professional development settings, with limited focus on their research potential. While numerous studies have contributed to reorienting staff week events, the implementation of service action research has seen comparatively fewer improvements. By aiming at this enriching aspect of staff weeks, we cross the limits of specialised events and create a fruitful setting for fostering sustainability values aligned with the European academic background.

Our approach, or an Enhanced Staff Weeks (ESW) model, introduces a comprehensive training and communication methodology that addresses these challenges. This innovative approach works as a solution, integrating technical principles from service action research to overcome the limitations of these capacity-building endeavours. To ensure top-notch collaborative procedures, we followed four key components: identifying the problem, developing a theory, constructing guiding concepts, and implementing interventions. This study delves into the service action investigation's theoretical, conceptual and implementational elements applied to the EU Project "ENHANCE Alliance of Technical Universities" real-life scenario.

This study broadens our comprehension of the action research application in career development, shedding light on its potential within the European project domain. This research offers valuable insights into improving organisational effectiveness by synergising service action research and innovative staff week organisation. Integrating these two strategies aims to foster a dynamic and learning-oriented environment within Higher Education Institutions.

Keywords: service action research, staff week organisation, career development, higher education, Higher Education Institutions (HEI).

1 INTRODUCTION

Pursuing quality higher education for students is one of the primary goals of European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), as it is established by the core Bologna mission. Even though there is equally a solid need to support and scale up innovative approaches towards the continuing development of university educators and staff members. Existing studies recognise a positive impact of training on motivation, work performance and career satisfaction in organisations [1], [2]. So, to what extent can staff week events be studied to address this issue?

Drawing upon two stands - career development and service action research - this study aims to develop a reliable method for capacity building at HEIs. By examining six training scenarios within the specific setting of a European project, we aim to address the following research questions:

- (RQ1) What training model might be appropriate for a higher education staff week?
- (RQ2) How can the service action research help improve training events for university faculty and staff?

Therefore, career development enables individuals to progress in their professional journey by making well-informed choices, embracing lifelong learning, and strategically planning their career pathways. Even though career growth and success might depend on behavioural, management, organisational, and work-life balance factors, there is still essential space for career development opportunities [3].

Hence, this chapter first briefly overviews the topic and introduces the key concepts. The second part of the study concerns the methodology, whereas the next section analyses the findings. Finally, the remaining part briefly summarises and critically explains the results.

2 METHODOLOGY

Service action research (SAR) is a valuable approach for researchers exploring service's transformative role in various contexts. It serves as a methodological framework for studying and contributing to the theory and practice of service research as it supports a four-stage approach for our study: identification, theorisation, creating guiding concepts and intervention [4], [5].

Through this SAR-based pathway, we can effectively engage in the growing service learning field in both academic and practical contexts. In terms of study settings, the following elements were instrumental in creating a meaningful process from two complementary perspectives:

- a) The academic approach involved a combination of theoretical ideas linked to the specific guiding principles.
- b) The practical application of the research-based framework included identifying problems and implementing interventions.

Before engaging directly in the model description, we will briefly describe the EU Project "ENHANCE Alliance of Technical Universities" as the leading innovation scenario for the study. The ENHANCE Alliance is a major European initiative to strengthen European universities of technology through collaborative efforts in educational programs and joint research projects. The primary aim of ENHANCE is to create a new European academic environment that promotes the interaction between technological advancements, society, and the natural environment.

This alliance tackles issues like climate change, digitalisation, and societal challenges. The project includes innovative measures, such as language learning partnerships and staff week events involving stakeholders from seven European technical universities. In the professional training areas, the upcoming career development actions took place in different Alliance universities-partners:

Table 1. Staff Week events.

Staff Week (SW)	Location & host institutions, staff week dates	Topic
SW 1	UPV University - Spain (19-21 October 2021)	The European University of Technology: innovation in university administration
SW 2	CHALMERS/ WUT Universities - Sweden (26-28 April 2022)	Innovative learning environments & virtual education
SW 3	CHALMERS University - Sweden (26-28 April 2022)	Sustainable entrepreneurship and innovation
SW 4	TUB University - Germany (27-29 September 2022)	ENHANCE: a university alliance which empowers people
SW 5	POLIMI University - Italy (13-15 June 2023)	ENHANCing talent for all
SW 6	RWTH University - Germany (17-20 October 2023)	ENHANCing intercultural skills for the international workplace

The ENHANCE Universities Staff Week is a global staff training initiative designed to augment the essential professional capabilities of administrative staff from ENHANCE Alliance Institutions. During this week, participants will be able to develop their technical and social skills within a genuine international environment. By the end of the program, attendees will have bolstered their understanding of innovation and internationalisation, improved their communication and teamwork abilities, and heightened their competence in handling contemporary university administrative responsibilities.

Motivated by the need for the Enhanced Staff Weeks (ESW) model, we now define a methodology for validating that the service action research foundation provides a reliable background for this event. Figure 1 below depicts our solution, which was slightly refined after running each training.

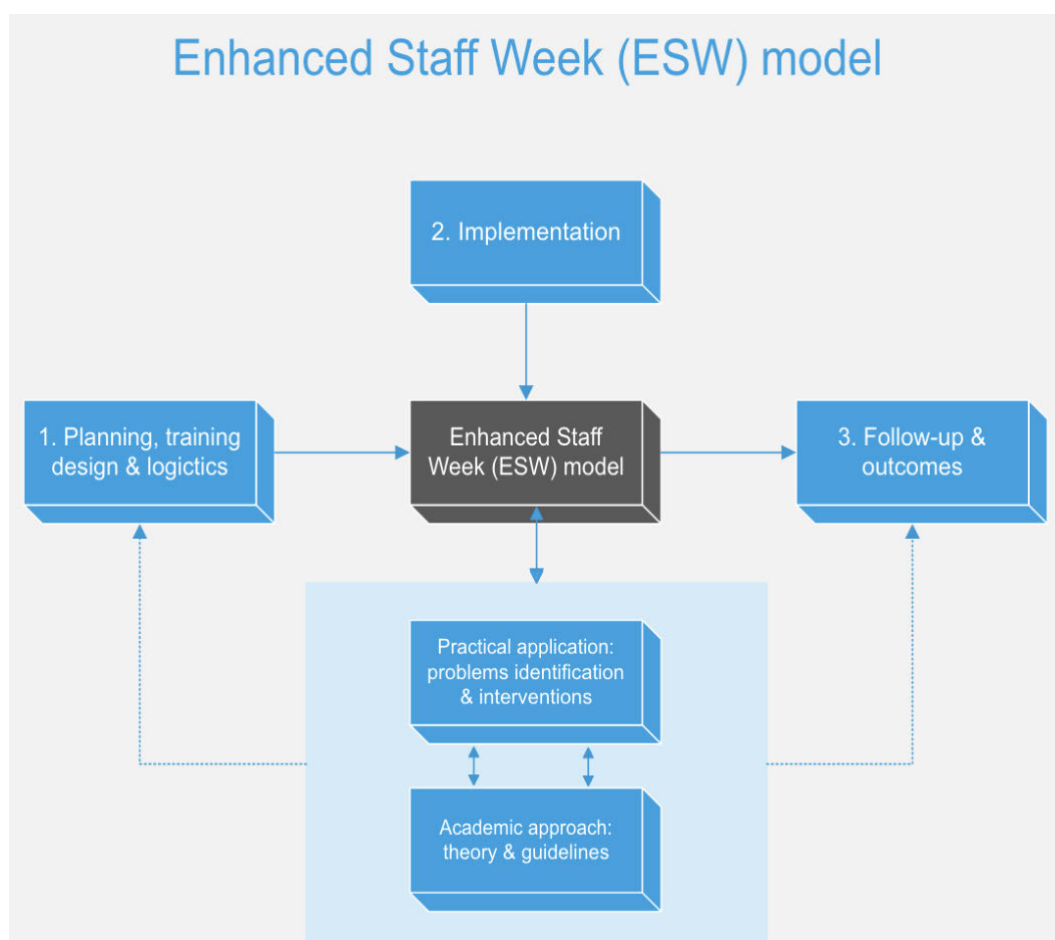


Figure 1. Enhanced Staff Week (ESW) model. Source: own design.

3 ESW MODEL IMPLEMENTATION

The starting point for launching stage one of the proposed model was arranged around service action research. We initiated the process of SAR practical application during the first staff week by brainstorming, sketching and specific tasks. The solution worked well for a small team, but the goal was to prepare the host institutions for organising staff we can have events, and the SAR academic approach helped edit clear written guidelines for creating a SW team, setting specific goals, designing learning pathways, foreseeing intended outcomes, offering follow-up support and getting feedback.

On completion of the preparatory phase, while implementing staff week instruction, another challenge related to the training phase had to be supported by service action research. In this scenario, the expertise in pedagogy prompted the adoption of active learning methodologies based on digital learning tools.

Throughout the follow-up stage, the academic validation experts provided invaluable guidance in implementing both continuous and final assessment strategies. As a result, concise one-minute daily learning outcomes and comprehensive SW questionnaires were developed. Figure 2 illustrates how every aspect of Enhanced Staff Week was carried out in collaboration with researchers, resulting in a highly effective and meaningful training experience for the entire learning community.

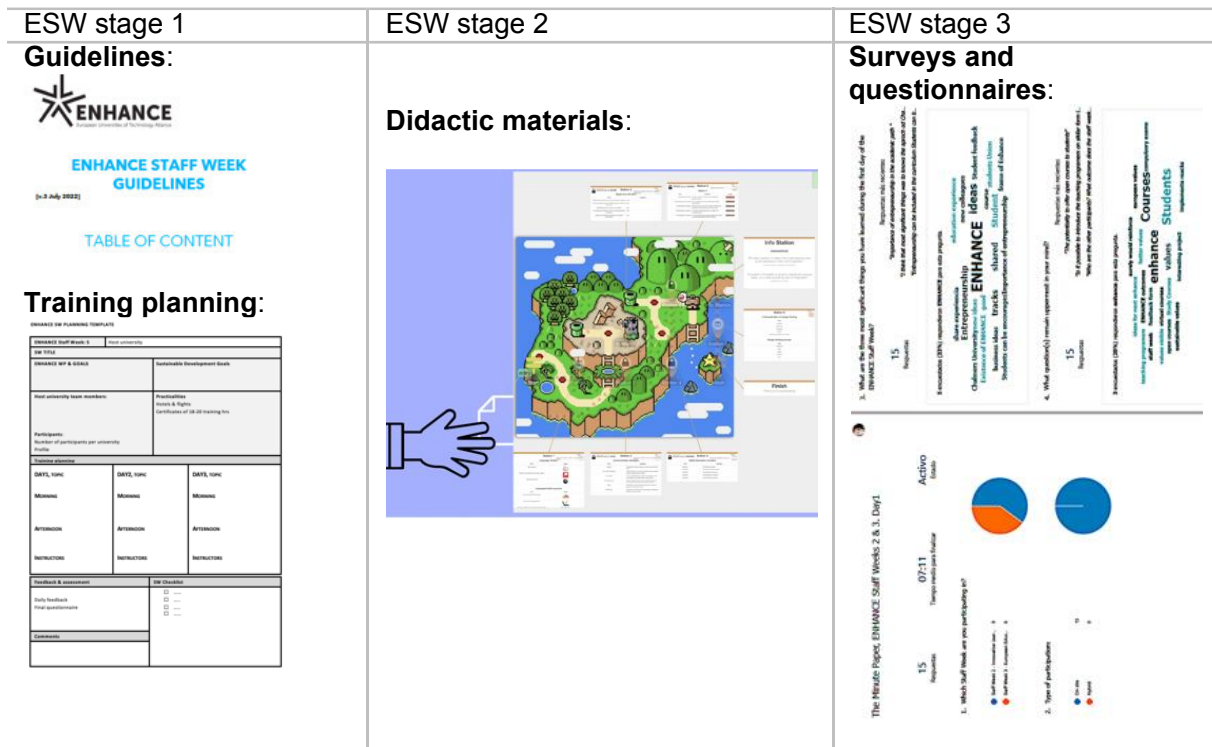


Figure 2. Service Action Research tools for the staff week events. Source: own design

4 CONCLUSIONS

In our research, we described a novel approach towards international staff organisation. For this matter, we consolidated service action research within three main stages of event organisation. Even though specific documentation and survey results cannot be disclosed due to confidentiality, some useful, practical recommendations were shared here. Despite its exploratory nature, the study offers some insight into each one of the research questions.

(RQ1) Through comprehensive evidence gathered from six staff training events in higher education, we have proven that these events are critical in building capacity. The diverse range of thematic workshops, networking opportunities, job-shadowing programs, and sharing of best practices creates an inclusive and unique educational landscape. The clearly defined cooperation model, the Enhanced Staff Weeks (ESW), adds value and offers a new type of commitment, enabling academically empowered career development for university staff.

(RQ2) Continuing with this rationale, the main contribution of the service action research is the advanced application of specific educational or research tools and practices that might be initially unknown to the organising entities within HE institutions.

The study was conducted with certain limitations in scope to ensure that data privacy concerns were adequately addressed. However, it is clear that additional research is necessary to fully explore the potential of the ESW model as a reliable and widely utilised staff week design pattern. By further investigating this promising approach, we can provide individuals with career development opportunities tailored to their needs and goals.

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