

## ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN UNIVERSITIES

**Elena Mirela SAMFIRA, PhD**

**Department of Teacher Education, BUASVM of Timisoara, Romania**

[mirelasamfira@usab-tm.ro](mailto:mirelasamfira@usab-tm.ro)

ORCID ID: [orcid.org/0000-0001-7638-0933](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7638-0933)

**Abstract:** *The university environment is one of the most important areas where future professionals can learn how to develop their assertive communication skills. Assertive communication can represent a chance for open communication that helps university students to become more efficient in dealing with others around them, getting better relationships. Developing assertive communication skills, university students will be able to reduce stress from their relationships with tutors, colleagues, administrators, librarians, etc. A very important aspect for them in this relationship is to learn how to stand up for their rights as students, as friends, as citizens, etc. University students with assertive communication skills also gain a better understanding of self-criticism and constructive criticism without developing a sense of self-importance. Developing assertive communication skills during university period, they are going to perform to their full potential, and to start their career in a new, successful manner. The main scope of this paper is to identify international and national universities which promote on their website interventions to develop their students' assertiveness and the articles about effectiveness of such interventions. We identified numerous international universities but just a few national universities with assertiveness interventions programmes on their website. Also, we identified a large number of studies about assertiveness interventions, conducted with human medical students, but none in other domains with a rather high level of stress, too - educational or military.*

**Keywords:** *counselling centres; university; students; assertive communication; efficiency;*

### **Introduction**

A university student's life is an extremely challenging period, with social and academic demands, many studies pointing out a high level of anxiety and stress. In this regard, there are studies that sustain that in academic exam period increases the stress level of university students (Zunhammer *et al.*, 2013), and others that support the opposite (Samfira & Arslan, 2017). During this stage of their life span, undergraduates need to cope with many psychosocial changes (Dyson & Renk, 2006; Nerdrum, Rustøen & Rønnestad, 2006). Stressful events and changes from academic environment can affect students' health and performance (Hamaideh, 2011). Some undergraduates may experience a kind of acculturative stress",

because of their emotional or physiological reaction generated by new (academic in this case) environment (Berry, 2005). There are students trained even from pre-academic period to face challenges, but at the same time, there are students with no experience in this domain, and they are facing many problems.

The models provided by the social environment are often improper for the academic environment and the future specialist. This is why one of the main responsibilities of parents and educators, as significant adults in pupils' life (Evans, 1959) is to help young people, from the very beginning, to communicate in an assertive manner (Kolb & Handley-Maxwell, 2003) or to organize trainings in assertive communication for students from elementary school (Michelson & Wood, 1980) or secondary school (Rotheram, Armstrong & Booraem, 1982). However, before offering trainings for students, it is important to identify the communication style of every student involved, in order to give them helpful advice to change their unproductive communication style (Waldherr & Muck, 2011).

Even though, some researches have sustained that there are strong relations between personality and communication styles (Leung & Bond, 2001; Weaver, 2005), some articles demonstrate that assertive communication style can be learned (Lewittes & Bem, 1983; Lin et al., 2004; Tavakoli et al., 2009). Aiming at this purpose, it is absolutely necessary to explain to the university students the characteristics of the Heffner (1997) communication styles: aggressive, passive, and assertive (Kolb & Griffith, 2009).

### ***Communication styles***

*An aggressive communication style* „applies force physically or symbolically, in order, minimally, to dominate and perhaps damage or, maximally, to defeat and perhaps destroy the locus of attack” (Infante, 1987, p. 158). This style is characterized by a monopolizing attitude, which demonstrates powerful behaviour (Heffner, 1997). People with an aggressive communication style disrespect or ignore the other individuals' rights (Kolb & Griffith, 2009).

*A passive communication style* is adopted by fearful individuals who have the tendency to block their feelings in confrontation with different problems in different situations (Bennis & Nanus, 1985).

*An assertive communication style* enable individuals to express ideas or opinions in a direct manner (Dasgupta, Suar & Singh, 2012), help people to sustain affirmation without need of proof, and to express their feelings, rights, and thoughts without attacking the rights, feelings and thoughts of other people (Sims, 2017; Freeman & Adams 1999; Rakos, 1991). This kind of communication style helps individuals to know that they have the right to refuse unreasonable requests (Beatty, Plax & Kearney, 1984), by saying „NO” to peers requests (Kolb & Griffith, 2009). They are not indifferent to the feelings of their communication partners and this is why they carefully utter both demands and complains in a polite but firm way. Assertiveness is a style of communicating and a competence that can be learned and acquired in different life's stages.

Assertive people are self-controlled about their behaviours (Garner, 2012), and are good communicators (Benton, 1999). People with a high level of assertiveness are more self-actualized (Lange & Jakubowski, 1976), are more confident about their opinions (Alberti & Emmons, 1970; 1974), and more confident about their ability to interact with other individuals (Masters & Burish, 1987). Instead, non-assertive individuals are described to be shy, self-deprecating and apologetic (Sims, 2017). From a gender perspective, Costa, Terracciano & McCrae (2001) sustain that men are more assertive than women are. From a cultural perspective, women with low level of assertiveness are liked more than women with a high level of assertiveness (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010). Assertiveness is strongly influenced by our personality traits, especially by Extraversion (Sims, 2017) and Neuroticism (Bratko et al., 2002).

### *Assertiveness trainings*

As a concept, assertiveness training appeared in the 1970s, in Western countries: numerous courses were proposed for university students by specialists from university counselling centres. These actions reflect the particular interest in this topic. At tertiary level, students can learn how to communicate in an assertive manner (Tavakoli et al., 2009), to develop new skills necessary in university environment, especially in their first year of study.

For this purpose, each university, depending on its specificity, should organize courses to develop assertive communication skills for their students. It is very important to take into account the specific problems of their future profession and career (Gelberg & Gelberg, 2005).

Assertive training is a structured intervention, including guidance, role-play, feedback, modelling, practical training, and an objective assessment from specialists (McCartan & Hargie, 2004). The main idea in assertive training is that people have never had the opportunity to give answers, in an assertive manner, to their communication partners (Lin et al., 2004). The interest in evaluating the effectiveness of intervention, which aim at the development of assertive communication skills at the population level, dates back to the 1950s. Researches has been conducted by psychologists Salter and Wolpe, as a type of behavioural therapy (Peneva & Mavrodiev, 2013), from 1970s as a form of intervention for protection of human rights (e.g. Heimberg, Montgomery, Madsen Jr. & Heimberg, 1977; Alberti & Emmons, 1970; 1974), and in counselling centres from universities, as a different type of group therapy (e.g. Golden, Corazzini & Grady, 1993).

For students, researches in this area, conclude that interventions involving the development of assertive communication skills, aim in particular, at reducing the stress level (Gelberg & Gelberg, 2005), increasing the level of self-esteem (Anant, 2009; Lin et al., 2004), increasing the self-efficiency at female university students (Akbari, Mohamadi & Sadeghi, 2012), decreasing the high scores of irrational beliefs (Alden & Safran, 1978), and increasing job satisfaction (Lounsbury et al., 2003).

Because communication styles reflect the social status of both partners (Berger, Fisek, Norman & Zeiditch, 1977), an important role of university is to help student with different cultural models (other country or region) to cope with many new demands: how to question a teacher, express different opinions, and decline a request (Tavakoli et al., 2009). Following this line, is important even for teachers, to know that assertive individuals (teachers) have a strong contribution to students' learning and satisfaction (Aylor & Opplinger, 2003).

### ***Study purpose***

Taking into consideration the positive consequences of students' assertiveness and the research support for promoting intervention/training for assertive communication skills by the university counselling centres, this paper identifies the prevalence of interventions for developing assertive communication in universities (which appear in university website) from abroad and from Romania. The researcher was interested in identifying how many university counselling centres organise and describe their trainings/workshops programmes on their website. This article highlights the differences between the counselling centres from Romania and other countries from the West in promoting explicitly programmes for developing assertive communication skills.

### **Methodology**

For this article we followed the methodology used in Harris (2011), with a quite similar issue. This paper is a review of i) interventions provided by university counselling centres to their students or by other bodies aiming to help students in adopting an assertive communication style and ii) articles about the results of the assessment of the effectiveness of the interventions for the development of assertiveness. These interventions address both students and teachers, to help them to develop assertive an assertive communication style in relation with colleagues, teachers, and students. The first step was to identify on Google the universities which organise trainings/workshops for developing assertive communication skills. The second step was to identify the articles who published the results of this kind of interventions.

### **Results and discussion**

As useful as the studies on assertiveness are the interventions for developing assertive communication provided by different university counselling centres for their students and teachers – because they reflect the theory implemented into practice. These trainings reflect the importance of developing assertive communication in their future specialists, to help them adapt to real life situations.

A large number of university counselling centres from abroad offer interventions for their students to develop or to increase their level of assertive behaviour. The intervention offered by the Counselling & Mental Health Centre from the University of Texas at Austin, Group Assertiveness Training evaluates the students individually to exclude students with psycho-pathological conditions that

would prevent them from understanding and participating in the group process. The groups are small, 6 students, and 6 sessions of 2 hours. It is recommended to record 2-5 sessions to be used later as feedback (Printz, 2003). The same university also organizes workshops on the topic Assertiveness Training in five sessions aiming to help students develop a responsible and efficient assertiveness. Each session is made up of ten students. There is no previous evaluation of those wishing to attend the workshop. This means that their aim is to help all persons interested in personal development.

Oxford Brookes University organises numerous assertive workshops for their undergraduates through its Counselling Service, of 1-3 sessions each. The University also recommends its students to adopt a communication style that will make their teachers answer to students' e-mails without being too insistent. At the same time, this university emphasises the importance of the non-verbal behaviour as well as the risk of being ignored if they avoid eye-to-eye contact with their teachers, if they are shy persons or if they speak too low (Haynes, 2000).

Texas Woman's University, through TWU Counselling Centre, helps its students to develop such behaviours as thinking positive about themselves, take responsibility for their own deeds and avoid taking responsibility for the behaviour of other people, paying attention to the type of information required in different circumstances, offering and accepting constructive criticism, which sometime is very difficult even for teachers and, learning that they have the right to say NO, without giving explanations.

The University of Leads presents to its students an intervention adapted from the book of Williams (2001) aimed to help their undergraduates in addressing their teachers in a polite manner, asking back things lent to their colleagues, and communicating their feelings to their colleagues, friends, or partners. The training is made up of two sessions and it contains the 10 rules of assertiveness and three questionnaires for the assessment of assertive behaviour – past, current, and future. The University of Wisconsin, through its Counselling Centre, has an assertive intervention for their undergraduates in three parts (a questionnaire of evaluation, a list of their own rights, and an example of conversation for each technique). For some students is easier when they have examples.

The University of Iowa, helps their students, in a different manner, by presenting articles of the self-help type. Reading those papers, the university hopes to develop their assertive behaviour.

The University of Glasgow organises workshops on this topic with the intention to help their students by self-evaluation and putting into practice techniques of assertive communication, strategies that help them face the challenges of a job. It is a good method of connecting undergraduates with possible types of issues that will challenge them in their future professions.

The University of Sydney, through its Centre for Continuing Education, organises two-days courses on this important topic, assertive communication, which describe the manipulative features of the three types of behaviour (assertive, passive and

aggressive), and teach students how to say NO in eight different ways. Special attention is paid to role-play and evaluation.

The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University from Australia provides its students, through the RMIT Student Counselling Service, with a training regarding assertive communication. It contains four communication style – aggressive, passive, passive-aggressive, and assertive. The intervention presents how to be more assertive, claiming that assertiveness is useful not only in problematic situations but also in building up healthy relationships (Pfeiffer, 2010). At national level, searching on the Internet the keywords „university assertiveness”, „assertive communication programme / training /intervention for university students”, it was identified the „Gheorghe Asachi” Technical University of Iasi, which organises a workshop for its students, through the Counselling Centre, in groups of 5-25 students, on assertive and non-critical communication.

Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, organises for its students, through Career Counselling Centre, a 4-hours training on effective communication, which also includes the development of assertive communication skills. If there are further interventions/trainings, organized by the counselling centres from universities, they have not been identified.

Numerous studies have explored the positive effects on the students accepting to participate in interventions/trainings for the development of assertive behaviour as well as correlation with different aspects: decrease of stress level (Gelberg & Gelberg, 2005; Lee & Crocket, 1994), increase of self-esteem and personal self-efficacy in girls undergraduates (Akbari, Mohamadi & Sadeghi, 2012), and increase of satisfaction in career (Lounsbury et al., 2003). Research focusing on training for tertiary level students are rather scarce and focusing on medical students (Omura, Levett-Jones, 2019a; Omura, Levett-Jones & Stone, 2019b; Warland, McKellar & Diaz, 2014; Lin et al., 2004; Begley & Glacken, 2004) or veterinary students (Gelberg & Gelberg, 2005).

But even though university counselling centres organise courses/workshops to develop assertive communication skills, it does not mean that university students are interested in them or will attend the entire course. Assessing the efficiency of interventions/training requires not only attending the entire programme/training, but also students' feedback. The problem seems to be more complex, and this could be the reason for this scarce number of studies that assess the effectiveness of assertive communication skills interventions/trainings for university students. Galassi et al (1974) have studied the relationship between assertiveness and shame – one of the reasons why students choose to attend programmes/trainings for development of assertiveness behaviour. Other studies have also showed a negative correlation between assertiveness and shame (Barrow & Hayashi, 1980; Garcia & Lubetkin, 1986). This feature is quite common among university students and it generates adjustment issues both within their groups and with their teachers. Certainly, there are more personality traits that might determine university students to enrol in courses/workshops for assertive communication skills development. They just have to be discovered.

After having analysed the interventions/trainings of development of assertive communication and the articles, we could observed that though the topic of assertiveness is very important, and many universities adopt interventions for helping their students to become more assertive. The society needs young persons that are well prepared to cope with different problems from university to jobs. This way, the university environment represents a part of a large system where future specialists may have the opportunity to learn how to develop their assertive communication skills. The importance given to developing students' assertive communication skills could be seen through the numerous training sessions posted on academic sites, aiming to help students improve their skills in this kind of communication.

Even though there are many universities at international level that organise assertiveness development interventions/trainings, there are only a few universities at national level. It is true that many counselling centres mention that their purpose is to develop students' assertive communication skills, but they do not provide explicit information about duration, number of students, number of sessions, and content. Analysing the universities' websites that explicitly offer interventions/trainings for developing assertive communication skills, numerous at international level and quite low at national level, it can be sustained that in Romania developing assertiveness remain a problematic issue. Maybe it is true that assertiveness is better developed in western culture not in a Latin one (Eskin, 2003). In terms of identifying studies that analyse the effectiveness of interventions for the development of assertive communication skills, organized by counselling centres from universities, the absence of studies may reflect both the difficulty of identifying a large number of participants for an article to be published in an international databases journal, as well as a lack of interest from university students to enrol and finish the interventions/trainings.

Even though, the results present large number of studies on assertiveness interventions with university, it is important to continue in this direction, with research not only from human medicine but also from other domains. In addition, another issue that draws attention is the absence of studies that develop assertiveness to reduce the stress level from other specializations, not just from human and veterinary medicine. It is true that the medical field is one with a very high level of stress (Clarke & Ruffin, 1992; Dahlin, Joneborg & Runeson, 2005; Burnard, et al., 2008; Edwards et al., 2010; Blomberg et al., 2014), but certainly there are other domains with a rather high level of stress, too: *educational* (Murray-Harvey et al., 2000) and *military* (Larsen, 2001).

Reaching expected results (developing assertive communication skills) will be of real help not only for the field of education, but also at personal level (better, more open relationships with one's friends and partners) and at professional level (develop healthier interpersonal relationships, manage conflicts, increase self-esteem, and human wellbeing in workplace).

### ***Limitations of the study***

First, due to numerous universities from abroad that organize trainings to develop students' assertive communication skills, it was impossible to synthesise the results from all universities. Second, although this paper was conducted rigorously, there is a risk to omit recent relevant studies. Third, the study presents a review of the interventions for the development of assertive communication skills in universities, at international and national level, without having an own interventions/training for university students. Fourth, this paper brings nothing new related to assertive communication skills development trainings for other student groups than in the medical field (human or veterinary), but merely reports their absence.

### ***Impact of the study***

We support, with this article, the promotion of sessions for the development of assertive communication not only for the students but also for their teachers, administrators who need to understand the benefits of such an approach in order to accept and promote it. This study also highlights the low number of interventions/trainings organized by the counselling centres in Romanian universities, to develop the assertive communication skills necessary for both professional and personal life.

In addition, this article emphasizes the necessity to assess the students' level of assertiveness in the very beginning (first year) to have enough time to organise interventions for students with low level of assertiveness, as in many other universities from Europa, United States, and Australia. In the same time, it would be a good practice the follow-up studies after 1-2-3 years, to evaluate the efficacy of interventions. Future studies are needed, especially in assessing the pre-service students' level of assertiveness, because they are the future teachers who can help their students to become more assertive, as students and as professionals. Because the teacher represents the most influential adult in the students' lives, after his parents (Evans, 1959), he is in a special situation to be able to contribute to decrease the cultural differences between Western and Latin context, in terms of the development of assertiveness (Chandrasekaran et al., 2010).

At least, this paper proposes the assessment of assertiveness and evaluation of the effectiveness of interventions, even for students from other fields with high level of stress (educational and military fields).

### **Conclusions**

The present study addressed the issue of developing assertive communication skills among university students, organized by the counselling centres from universities. It has been searched if there is an interest from university counselling centres to develop this kind of communication, which brings many benefits (reducing stress, reducing bullying, building self-esteem, increasing work satisfaction). The existence of intervention/trainings aiming explicitly to develop



assertive communication skills, both at international and national (Romania) level has been analysed to present concrete examples for other counselling centres.

The results have identified a great interest from abroad universities to teach assertiveness to their students probably being more aware of the positive consequences on their personal and professional life. At national level, only two universities have been identified to organize, according to the model from abroad, trainings to develop students' assertiveness. One possible explanation could be that in Romania there is still no emphasis on assertive communication, neither in pre-university education, nor in the universities or workplaces (except for multinationals companies). But, Romania is part of the European Union, and we should help young people to adapt to any society, bearing in mind that internationalization will affect us more and more.

Another aspect identified, quite problematic, is related to studies that have analysed the effectiveness of interventions/trainings for the development of assertive communication skills among university students. All papers identified, which have presented the results of the assessment of the effectiveness of the interventions for the development of assertiveness, were conducted with human medical students (nurses, midwives or doctors) and only one in the veterinary medicine field; the medical field being considered one with a high level of stress. We also draw attention on the absence of such studies in other categories of students, in the fields that are also considered to have a high level of stress (ex. educational and military).

To sum up, this article has increased our knowledge regarding the active implications and transparency of counselling centres from other countries/continents in developing assertiveness in university students (number of sessions, description of every session, the enrolment process, the specialist they will work with), to help them have a clear picture of the whole process.

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