Assertively in university higher technician and engineering students

Asertividad en estudiantes de técnico superior universitario e ingeniería

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Abstract

The objective of the quantitative study was to know the difference in assertiveness levels in Técnico Superior Universitario and Engineering students to develop training strategies. The sample, chosen for convenience through a non-random instrument, consisted of 508 participants, 144 (28.3%), belonged to the Universidad Tecnológica del Sur de Sonora (UTS), 132 (91.6%) of Técnico Superior Universitario (TSU) and 12 (8.4%) from Engineering (Ing). From the Universidad Tecnológica de Nezahualcóyotl (UTNEZA), there were 364 (71.7%), 316 (86.8%), from TSU, 18 (5%) from Bachelor's (LIN) and 30 (8.2%) Engineers. Their average age was 20 years, 240 (47.2%) were women and 268 (52.8%) men. The Shelton and Burton (2004) Assertiveness instrument was applied. The data was analyzed with the SPSS 27 statistical program. The results show a high level of assertiveness in TSU, engineering and undergraduate students from UTS and UTNEZA and that there is no significant difference between the academic levels mentioned in both universities. It concludes by proposing to carry out research on the level of assertiveness in students from other educational programs, from both university communities to compare and intervene objectively in possible aspects to improve.

Assertiveness, Students, Technological Universities

Resumen

El objetivo del estudio cuantitativo fue, conocer la diferencia en los niveles de asertividad en estudiantes de Técnico Superior Universitario e Ingeniería para elaborar estrategias de capacitación. La muestra, elegida por conveniencia a través de un instrumento no aleatorio, estuvo formada por 508 participantes, 144 (28.3 %), pertenecían a la Universidad Tecnológica del Sur de Sonora (UTS), 132 (91.6 %) de Técnico Superior Universitario (TSU) y 12 (8.4 %) de Ingeniería (Ing). De la Universidad Tecnológica de Nezahualcóyotl (UTNEZA), fueron 364 (71.7%), 316 (86.8 %), de TSU, 18 (5 %) de Licenciatura (LIN) y 30 (8.2 %) Ing. Su edad promedio fue de 20 años, 240 (47.2%) fueron mujeres y 268 (52.8%) hombres. Se aplicó el instrumento de Asertividad de Shelton y Burton (2004). Los datos se analizaron con el programa estadístico SPSS 27. Los resultados muestran un nivel de asertividad elevado en los estudiantes de TSU, ingeniería y licenciatura de UTS y UTNEZA y que no existe diferencia significativa entre los niveles académicos mencionados en ambas universidades. Se concluye proponiendo realizar investigaciones acerca del nivel de asertividad en alumnos de otros programas educativos, de ambas comunidades universitarias para comparar e intervenir de objetivamente en los posibles aspectos a mejorar.

Asertividad, Estudiantes, Universidades tecnológicas

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Introduction

One of the most important functions of higher education is to enable citizens to exercise positions and responsibilities in public administration and private enterprise as well as in society (Martí et al., 2014), which is why the training of professionals requires a special focus on the development of competencies necessary for interpersonal development (Maluenda et al., 2017).

The changing, globalized and highly complex society we live in requires people with the ability to build relationships based on their knowledge and how they apply it to a reality characterized by variability, complexity, uncertainty and speed. A fundamental issue in this context is the issue of social relationships, simply because the individual is a social being and these relationships are extremely complex and necessary; they cannot be avoided, no one can live isolated from society and have "quality of life" (Acevedo 2008).

Social skills and assertive behavior are currently at the center of interest, as shown by the wide dissemination and profusion of works on the subject, both theoretical and popular (Gismero, 2000, cited in García 2010).

The study of social skills has experienced a remarkable boom in recent years. Individuals spend a high percentage of their time in some form of social interaction, whether in pairs or in groups, and experience has shown that positive social relationships are one of the greatest sources of self-esteem and personal well-being. It is also evidenced that the social competence of a subject has an important contribution to his or her personal competence, since currently, personal and social success seems to be more related to the sociability and interpersonal skills of the subject than to his or her cognitive and intellectual skills (García, 2010).

Caballo (2009) defines socially skilled behavior as the set of behaviors emitted by an individual in an interpersonal context, which includes appropriate ways of expressing feelings, attitudes, desires, opinions or rights of a person, in a manner appropriate to the situation, respecting those behaviors in others.

Within this set of skills are also those known as assertiveness, which are one of the most important aspects to develop in school-age children, as well as in adolescents and adults. Thus, social skills, in their most advanced form, are aimed at solving immediate problems of the situation, and, at the same time, minimize the likelihood of future problems (González et al., 2018).

It is necessary to be clear that daily, the individual, faces situations with which he feels uncomfortable, or lies when giving an answer to someone to avoid an unpleasant consequence or his anger, among others. When these situations generate significant negative consequences, it is time to learn to defend their rights and points of view from assertiveness (López & Calero, 2006 cited in León et al., 2009).

Rimm & Masters (1981) define assertive behavior as "Interpersonal behavior that involves the honest and relatively direct expression of feelings" (p. 101).

Interpersonal communication is an essential part of human activity and the highest representative of the relationships established with others. However, this communication is often scarce, frustrating and inadequate. The course of daily life is determined, at least partially, by the level of social skills (Caballo, 2002).

Social skills are the specific social abilities or skills required to competently perform an interpersonal task. To speak of skills is to refer to a set of learned behaviors. Some examples are: saying no, making a request, responding to a greeting, handling a problem with a friend, empathizing or putting yourself in another person's place, asking questions, expressing sadness, saying nice and positive things to others. Thus, assertiveness is a narrow concept, an area, very important of course, that is integrated within the broader concept of social skills. Assertive behavior is an aspect of social skills; it is the "style" with which the person interacts (Garcia 2010).

Sheldon & Burton (2004) mention that there are three obstacles for a person to be assertive: 1) low self-esteem, 2) inability to proceed in the face of conflict, and 3) poor communication.

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Assertiveness is a behavior and not a personality characteristic, so it is spoken of as an ability in the field of social skills (Ortega et al., 2019) that can be used as a personal resource to deal with bullying and conflict situations (Rodríguez & Noé, 2017), since it allows expressing needs, thoughts and feelings sincerely, without beating around the bush and without violating the rights of others (Deaño et al., 2020 cited in Calua et al., 2022).

For Quiñonez & Moyano (2019), through assertive communication, men and women are formed with critical thoughts, tolerant and sensitive to the experience of others, capable of finding areas of agreement, as well as defending their points of view even before a facilitator without disrespecting him, in this sense, educating is helping to mature, to make critical people by providing them with criteria to choose with autonomy and freedom a life project.

Assertive training in higher education

The process of transformation that is taking place in education worldwide has given another definition to "professional competence". This is moving from the simple management of knowledge to an integral vision that incorporates the cognitive, affective and procedural dimensions involved in professional behaviors, where professional mastery is understood as the management of knowledge (knowing), the skills in the required techniques (doing) and the ability to perform (being) (Calderón, 2012).

Assertive communication implies the integral formation of students. The person who communicates assertively defends himself in his interpersonal relationships, is satisfied with his life, is self-confident, expressive, spontaneous (Calua, et al., 2021).

Monjas (2002), states that the lack of social skills has been related to several problems: 1) low acceptance (rejection or social isolation by peers); 2) school problems (low academic performance, failure, dropping out, failure to comply with school rules and maladjustment); 3) personal problems (low self-esteem, withdrawal, feelings of handicap); 4) psychological maladjustment (depression, anxiety and nervousness); 5) juvenile maladjustment (delinquency, problems with authority); and 6) mental health problems that occur from adolescence and even into adulthood (alcoholism, suicide, substance dependence).

Flores & Prado (2021), highlight the importance of promoting social skills in the educational environment, because it has an important impact on the management of disputes and the generation of consensus, in this sense, the promotion of assertive training is synonymous with the promotion of a culture of debate, respect for the judgments and criteria of others, the valuation of the positions and beliefs of others.

Statement of the problem

The General Coordination of Technological and Polytechnic Universities (CGUTyP) intends to guarantee a place in higher education for all those who request it. In a scheme of priorities, with special attention to social groups living in marginalized regions, vulnerable groups and in contexts of violence, as well as the inhabitants of urban and rural areas with greater educational, economic and social backwardness. Priority is given to people with disabilities and indigenous and Afro-descendant women (CGUTyP, 2020).

In the Technological Universities of Southern Sonora (UTS) and the Technological University of Nezahualcoyotl (UTNETZA), the student profile is: they come from underprivileged families, they are "pioneers" in their families in pursuing higher education, not all have family support and some work to support themselves. On the other hand, when the situation warrants it, they show nobility, cooperation and solidarity.

Many students lack a solid scholastic formation, they lack a sense of self-worth, so they show insecurity and anguish when they are exposed to evaluations that involve exposing themselves to peers or teachers. Vulnerabilities, shortcomings and strengths emerge in interpersonal relationships. Sometimes, in the TUs mentioned, students experience disrespect, disapproval of their person; in this case they require social skills to address conflicts, these situations generate tension and uncertainty and the disciples who bring a greater deficit of assertive training, project more anxiety and less self-efficacy at the interpersonal level, they are students who need to improve their living conditions and develop social, academic and personal skills.

In relation to the above, states Flores & Prado (2021) it is relevant to understand the importance of assertive training in the evolutionary stage that university students are going through, for them, it is necessary to develop socially by stimulating the ability to solve interpersonal problems, deal with rejection and aggressiveness, and attitudes that encourage positive actions of other peers; from the health perspective, these skills generate individual and collective mental health.

Failing to address assertive communication would imply neglecting the integral formation of students; the limitations would have repercussions on nonverbal communication, verbal communication, the use of paralinguistic components and the norms of courtesy established in the environment (Caballo, 1993). In addition, they would present multiple difficulties in expressing their feelings, thoughts and contextualized actions (Calua et al., 2021).

It is the teachers who could facilitate the development of these social skills to the range of professional competencies by implementing simple strategies or by modeling, as long as the teacher possesses the qualities of assertive behavior (Sarmiento et al., 2021).

Considering that social skills and assertive training are a formative axis of university student life and a requirement for the integral formation of the student, the following problem arises:

Is there a difference in the levels of assertiveness of students of Higher University Technician and Engineering to elaborate possible training strategies on the subject?

Therefore, the objective of the present study is to know the difference in the levels of assertiveness in college and engineering students in order to develop training strategies on the subject.

Method

Sample

The present study was conducted during the period from January to March 2023. We worked with a quantitative approach method, the sample was chosen by convenience through a non-random instrument, it consisted of 508 participants. 144 (28.3 %) belonged to UTS, 132 (91.6 %) to TSU and 12 (8.4 %) to Ing). The average age was 20 years (SD= 4.37), with a minimum of 18 and a maximum of 54. 240 (47.2%) were women and 268 (52.8%) men.

Instrument

The Shelton & Burton Assertiveness Test (2004) was applied. The instrument consists of 20 items and a 6-point Likert-type scale: 0) never, 1) almost never, 2) sometimes, 3) frequently, 4) almost always and 5) always. It evaluates four categories of assertiveness: consistently assertive, usually assertive, mildly assertive and difficulties in being assertive.

Procedure

Contact was established with the students through e-mail, inviting them to participate by explaining the reason for the study and to answer the questionnaire in an Internet link. The mail, included access to the form, the students answered and the data captured were stored in a repository for classification and study. Their participation was voluntary.

Data analysis

The data obtained were captured and analyzed using the statistical program SPSS version 27. The reliability of the assertiveness scale proposed by Shelton (2004) was calculated using the McDonald Omega coefficient (ω), suggests an adequate reliability of the scale, with values ranging from 0 to 1, where 0 indicates no reliability and 1 perfect reliability, finding that values of .70 or higher are acceptable (Zumbo, 2007). The set of items counted with good scale reliability (20 items, ω = .93, e.g., I can express my feelings openly).

Results and discussion

The results obtained show that the means of the items were centered in the categories "frequently" and "almost always", revealing a high and similar level of assertiveness in the TSU, engineering and undergraduate students of UTS and UTNEZA (Table 1), therefore, there is no difference between the academic levels mentioned in both universities. There is a high level of these skills, which indicates that the respondents are able to manage their interpersonal relationships adequately and deal with interpersonal conflicts in an assertive manner. According to (Rosa et al., 2014) social skills are the basis for an adequate social adaptation in the family, academic and work environments, which, in turn, becomes a source of personal satisfaction and affiliation. Likewise, these social skills are constituted as protective and adaptive factors to face the transition from basic education to the world of work or higher education (Flórez & Prado, 2021).

Assertiveness									
	1		**2**		**3**		**4**		**5**
Subjects	132		12		316		30		18	
Mean	3.89		3.93		3.74		3.96		3.84	
Standard Deviation	0.76		0.83		0.81		0.68		0.86	
Minimums	2		2		1		2		2	
Maximums	5		5		5		5		5	

Note: 1= UTS (TSU), 2= UTS (Eng.), 3= UTNEZA (TSU), 4= UTNEZA (Eng.), UTNEZA (Lic.).

Table 1 Level of assertiveness by academic level and university

Likewise, with Student's t-test, the means of the assertiveness variable at the TSU levels of both universities were compared and it was found that there is no significant difference in terms of the Institution attended by the TSU students who participated in the study (Table 2). Flórez & Prado, (2021), state that the existence of personal, family, educational, social and cultural factors have contributed in some, to the development of assertive communication, and at the same time a very favorable impact of this skill on the social performance of young people in different areas is deduced.

	UTS		UTNEZA		t	gl	p	Cohen's d
	M	DE	M	DE				
Level of assertiveness	3.90	.76	3.74	.82	1.84	448	.06	.19

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2 Comparison of TSU level means by university

Also, it was found that there is no significant difference in the means of the assertiveness variable in the engineering students of UTS and UTNEZA who participated in the study (Table 3). In this regard (Maluenda et al., 2017) state that Assertiveness is a required skill for students to establish adequate communication with authorities, peers and users, besides being an important tool to have adequate interpersonal relationships and take care of work environments. Likewise (Longhini, et al., 2017) affirm that, in the social and family environment, assertive communication provides greater opportunities for negotiation, participation, and decision making, which contributes in the formation of emotional regulation, autonomy, and identity of students.

	UTS		*UTNEZA*		t	gl	p	Cohen's d
	M	DE	M	DE				
Level of assertiveness	3.93	.83	3.96	.59	-.12	42	.90	-.04

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 3 Comparisons of means of engineering studies per university

Also, in order to know if there are significant differences between one university and the other with respect to their level of assertiveness, a comparison of means was made by means of a Student's t-test for independent samples (Table 4).

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	UTS		UTNEZA		t		gl	p	Cohen's d
	M	DE	M	DE					
Level of assertiveness	3.90	.76	3.77	.80	1.700		508	.09	.17

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Table 4 Results of Student's t-test "University"

The above shows that there are no significant differences in terms of the students' university of origin. The statistical power of this difference is minor since it meets the minimum criteria to determine that this difference between means is established and is supported by Cohen's test d. For their part, (Raimundi et al., 2017) highlight the contribution that assertive communication makes on academic performance, favoring participation in class, the expression of opinions, requests and complaints in an appropriate manner; in the school environment it is also a protective factor against bullying (Lozada et al., 2020).

On the other hand, to find out if there are significant differences in the sex and level of assertiveness of students from both universities, a comparison of means was performed using a Student's t-test for independent samples (Table 5).

	Female		Male		t	gl	p	Cohen's d
	M	DE	M	DE				
Level of assertiveness	3.63	.82	3.96	.73	-4.812	508	< .001	.42

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Table 5 Mean values for contrasting differences in assertiveness by gender

It was found that there are significant differences in terms of gender and level of assertiveness, with males presenting significantly higher assertiveness than females. The statistical power of these differences is greater since it meets the minimum criteria to determine that this difference between means is established and is supported by Cohen's d test. The above coincides with García (et al., 2014) who affirms that gender social stereotypes directly influence the behaviors performed by Ruiz (et al., 2013), and that based on the fulfillment of these, some social behaviors are reinforced and others are punished. For that reason, men are expected to behave more assertively and women are expected to be more empathetic and gentle.

Likewise, considering the differences between male and female participants, Del Pettre & Del Pettre (2002) state that "the values, norms and rules of each culture, added to the social performance related to gender stereotypes, would be determinants of interpersonal behavior" (García, et al., 2014, p. 128).

Conclusions

The objective of the present work was fulfilled: to know the difference in the levels of assertiveness in Higher Technical University and Engineering students in order to elaborate training strategies on the subject.

According to the results, the means of the items are centered on the categories "frequently" and "almost always", revealing a high and similar level of assertiveness in TSU, engineering and undergraduate students of UTS and UTNEZA, therefore, there is no significant difference in the level of assertiveness between the students of both institutions.

According to (Maluenda et al., 2017) in university education Assertiveness acquires an indispensable role in the formation of professionals who are able to interact successfully in different contexts, adjusting to the different interlocutors with whom they relate, generating appropriate and favorable interpersonal relationships for their performance and for their well-being in the work context

For his part, Castro (2005 cited in González, et al., 2018) states the importance of integrating into the educational curriculum, as an essential part of schooling, programs aimed at the development of social skills that explicitly teach skills to relate assertively. Increasing social competence within the classroom would help improve student integration with their peers, decrease aggressiveness and help them develop more adaptive behaviors.

In this regard, (Quiñonez & Moyano, 2019), argue that the result of assertive behavior does not always have as a derivation the absence of antagonistic conflict between the parties, it may cause discomfort, but when acting assertively when communicating feelings, it is satisfactory to be able to express the opinion without attacking anyone, a situation that contributes significantly to reduce anxiety through more intimate and meaningful relationships, achieving greater self-respect and better social adaptation.

On the other hand, (Garrido et al., 2010) affirm that, given that social skills and specifically assertiveness are commands and behavioral repertoires acquired mainly through learning, it is essential to design educational intervention strategies to train young people in the empowerment of some of these social skills without losing sight of the context of the culture in which the student is immersed.

Studies point out the need for the development of social skills in students so that they can have a healthy adult life and become citizens capable of forming a more just and caring society; it is impossible for teachers to promote the development of social skills if they have not developed these skills in themselves. Acevedo (2008) argues that in order to promote the development of social skills in students, teachers must have developed these skills in themselves and, consequently, this process should be one of the curricular objectives in teacher training.

Finally, it is proposed to conduct research on the level of assertiveness in students of other educational programs in both university communities in order to compare and intervene objectively in the possible aspects to be improved such as the design of educational projects, curricula, training programs and other tools of the teaching-learning process (Sarmiento, et al., 2021).

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