

COMMUNICATION AND SELF-CARE TRAINING FOR NON-TEACHING UNIVERSITY EMPLOYEES

Lenka Hudáková, Viktória Hičárová, & Marta Dobrowolska Kulanová
University Counselling Centre, Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice (Slovakia)

Abstract

The work duties of non-teaching first contact employees (employees of study departments, libraries, student houses, canteens and others) at the Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice are focused on providing assistance to students and guiding them through the various challenges of university life. In the current situation of increased levels of inclusion and diversity at universities, the demands and pressure on first contact employees are also increasing, with regard to managing various crisis situations or working with specific types of students. The main aim of this study is to a) introduce training program for non-teaching first contact employees; b) explore the perceived effectiveness of this training through the degree of perceived usefulness by employees. The training program, conducted in February 2025, focused on enhancing communication skills, conflict resolution, and self-care practices. The training employed activating teaching methods to ensure participant engagement and practical skill acquisition. Specialized lecturers delivered parts of the training, including a session on supporting students with special needs and a mindfulness workshop aimed at stress management. A total of 36 employees (mean age = 42.5; SD = 3.45) participated in the program. To assess the perceived usefulness of the training, a custom-designed questionnaire was developed, comprising three subscales: Communication, Managing Stress, and Managing Conflict, each consisting of six items. The questionnaire was administered 2 days after the training. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was high, with Cronbach's alpha exceeding 0.85 for all subscales. Additionally, a modified version of the Session Rating Scale (SRS) with four items was administered to gather immediate feedback on the training experience. Results indicated no statistically significant differences in perceived usefulness between employees with more than ten years of experience and those with less than ten years, nor between student office employees and other staff categories (e.g., library staff, dormitory staff, international office employees). Overall, the training was evaluated as highly effective, with mean scores across all subscales exceeding 4.0, indicating a positive reception and perceived utility among participants. The findings suggest that targeted training programs employing interactive methods and addressing specific workplace challenges can effectively enhance first-contact employees' preparedness to support a diverse student body while promoting personal well-being.

Keywords: *Non-teaching staff, communication, conflicts, stress, training.*

1. Introduction

Frontline non-academic staff (such as employees of study departments, libraries and student dormitories among others) play a key role in providing information, support, and administrative assistance to students. This represents a specific type of interaction in which frontline staff are placed in a position where concrete advice or intervention is expected from them. Interpersonal and communication skills are critical for both the effectiveness of their work and their overall job satisfaction (Menke et al., 2020). Elevated stress levels among frontline non-academic staff are linked to various internal and external factors specific to each university (Mensah et al., 2017; Verma & Kumar, 2014). A significant and often stressful part of their responsibilities involves communication with students who may be angry, frustrated, or distressed. Survey findings have shown that nearly 40% of university students reported experiencing overwhelming anger during the course of two semesters (Preece et al., 2017). Some students express their frustration passively, while others may do so in ways that staff could perceive as threatening. A specific category includes students with special needs, whose numbers are steadily increasing year by year. Data from the Annual Report of the University Counseling Center at Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice over the past three years indicate a significant rise in students with special needs (2020/2021 = 42 students; 2022/2023 = 61 students; 2023/2024 = 96 students). In order for frontline non-academic staff to effectively support students, help de-escalate emotional situations, or respond appropriately to their needs and feelings,

they must themselves feel safe and confident. Research highlights that one of the factors influencing job satisfaction among both academic and non-academic staff is the degree to which the organization provides care and support—such as access to supervision and training programs for professional development (Fabian & Reyes, 2024; Nacor, 2013).

2. Design and objectives

A cross-sectional design was used. The main aim of this paper is to a) introduce training program for non-teaching first contact employees; b) explore the perceived effectiveness of this training through the degree of perceived usefulness by employees.

3. Methods

3.1. Sample and procedure

A total of 36 employees (mean age = 42.5; SD = 3.45) participated in the training. The training program was focused on two key areas: a) development of communication skills (including the advantages and disadvantages of various communication forms, effective communication, introduction to helping conversations, crisis intervention, conflict management, and working with specific types of students), and b) self-care (covering stress and relaxation techniques). To assess the perceived usefulness of the training, a custom-designed questionnaire was administered two days after the training. Given the length, content, and format of the intervention, we chose to evaluate the effectiveness of the program by examining the extent to which it met participants' needs, their satisfaction levels, and the perceived usefulness of the training.

3.2. Measures

- Session Rating Scale (SRS) (Johnson, 1995) is four-item scale designed to assess the quality of the therapeutic alliance. In this study it was adapted to evaluate the training alliance. The scale uses 4-point Likert-type responses (1 = not true at all, 5 = very much true) across the following subscales: Relationship, Goals and Topics, Approach or Method, and Overall. Cronbach alfa was 0.72.
- Communication scale is custom-designed scale created for the purpose of this research. It consistent from 6 items focused on: clarity and comprehensibility of communication, self-confidence in communication, knowledge of specific communication techniques, ability to adapt communication style to challenging situations, and perceived adequacy of the training content. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach alfa was 0.92.
- Managing Stress Scale is custom-designed 6-item scale measuring the ability to identify sources of stress in both personal and professional contexts, self-confidence in managing stressful situations, knowledge of specific relaxation strategies, and perceived ability to cope with or prevent stress. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) Cronbach alfa was 0.89.
- Managing Conflict scale is a custom-designed 6-item scale focused on self-assessment of participants' abilities to identify the causes of conflict, respond effectively to conflict situations, and prevent their escalation. Items included references to interactions with both students and colleagues, self-confidence in conflict resolution, knowledge of specific intervention techniques, and overall perception of the training's usefulness. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach alfa was 0.93.

3.3. Results

3.3.1. Introduction of training program. The training was delivered in the form of an intensive two-day in-person workshop, with 36 participants per session. The sessions run from 8:30 AM to 4:00 PM each day and combine theoretical input with practical exercises, group activities, and experiential learning.

- Day 1 focuses on: Effective communication with students in psychologically sensitive situations; Managing conflict in academic settings; Self-care and stress management strategies for educators
- Day 2 builds on this foundation with sessions on: Relaxation techniques and grounding methods; Basic crisis intervention and referral strategies; Conflict resolution in the workplace; Program reflection and evaluation.

Participants are encouraged to bring comfortable clothing and yoga mats, as the program includes practical components such as guided relaxation and movement. All training materials, writing supplies, and catering were provided.

3.3.2. Effectiveness of the training program. The data were analysed by IBM SPSS Statistics, version 21 for Windows. The results have shown no statistically significant differences in perceived usefulness between employees with more than ten years of experience and those with less than ten years, nor between student office employees and other staff categories (e.g., library staff, dormitory staff, international office employees). Overall, the training was evaluated as highly effective, with mean scores across all subscales exceeding 4.0, indicating positive feedback among participants.

Figure 1. Descriptive statistics of research variables.

	N	Min-Max	Mean	St. deviation
SRS	36	1-5	4.77	0.32
Communication scale	36	1-5	4.03	0.72
Managing stress scale	36	1-5	4.01	0.77
Managing conflict scale	36	1-5	4.08	0.76

4. Discussion and conclusion

The training program was developed in response to a critical and often overlooked need within university support systems: the psychosocial preparedness of non-teaching first-contact staff who are neither clinically trained nor institutionally supported to manage encounters. Presented training program directly addresses this gap offering a structured, evidence-informed program focused not only on skill-building in communication and conflict management, but also on cultivating a sense of self-efficacy and psychological safety among participants themselves. Supporting both the student and the staff members is essential in a time when student populations are becoming more diverse, more vulnerable, and more likely to seek help. By embedding practices such as guided reflection, grounding techniques, and relational micro-skills into an intensive yet accessible format, training offers containment, collegiality, and competence. The overwhelmingly positive reception from participants across departments and seniority levels suggests that this is not a peripheral benefit, but a core need. As universities seek to strengthen their support ecosystems, initiatives like our program should not be optional add-ons, but integral components of staff development policy.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by Internal Scientific Grant System of Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice no. vvgs-2024-3425.

References

- Fabian, B. M. L., & Reyes, M. V. F. (2024). Job Satisfaction Among CEU Teaching and Non-Teaching Employees: Basis for A Proposed Employee Retention Program. *International Journal of Religion*, 5(6), 1-11.
- Johnson, L. D. (1995). *Psychotherapy in the Age of Accountability*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Menke, D. J., Duslak, M., & McGill, C. M. (2020). Administrator perceptions of Academic advisor tasks. *NACADA Journal*, 40(2), 85-96.
- Mensah, H. K., Fosu, F. A., & Oteng-Abayie, E. F. (2017). Occupational stressors among university nonacademic staff: results from a representative public university in Ghana. *International Journal of Business Excellence*, 13(2), 200-216.
- Nacor, A. (2023). Job Satisfaction of Non-Teaching Its Relationship to University Policies and Leadership Styles Linked to Their Performance: Based for Proposed Program. *International Journal for Research in Applied Science and Engineering Technology*, 11(1):489-496.
- Preece, J., Hosford, S., & Brooks, M. (2017). Academic Advising and Anger: Keeping Advisors and Students Safe. Retrieved from: <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Portals/0/Events/Web%20Events/2018/Documents/DW90%20Handout.pdf>